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December 10 1889.

No. 646.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXV.



OR,

The Grand Corral at Cross-Notch.

A Romance of the Yellowstone.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF THE "TEXAS TOM-CAT" STORIES,
"BILDAD BARNACLE," "HAPPY HANS,"
"CAPTAIN CACTUS," "THE SILVER
SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A HOT PURSUIT.

"HOOP-LA! Go-o-long! Stop, you red rascal, or I'll make a sieve of your greasy blanket!" Gideon Dane bent forward in his saddle, swung his revolver menacingly, and addressed his exclamations alternately to his horse and to the villainous-looking half-breed he was pursuing.

It was an aggravating case, and Dane was

THERE WAS SCARCELY TIME FOR THOUGHT. ON THE IMPULSE OF THE MOMENT GID GAVE A GREAT SHOUT, RAISED HIS REVOLVER AND FIRED.

hot with anger. His saddle, the joy of his life and the pride of his eye, was being ridden and contaminated by a mongrel red-skin.

He had expected to encounter thieves. In fact, the wholesale stealing of cattle in the Bitter Creek country was the immediate cause of his presence there. Such audacious thieving! And, then, the object stolen! His brain whirled with its tide of indignation.

And well it might. While taking a noonday siesta beneath a clump of trees in the rear of the ranch-house, his saddle serving as a pillow, the half-breed had quietly slipped it from beneath his head, tossed it on a pony and rode off with it!

It was a costly, silver-mounted miracle of the saddler's art, and Dane highly prized it. In this respect he was a true cowboy. Its absence awakened him, and when he realized that it was gone his surprise was great. He knew it had been stolen, for the Bitter Creek Ranch lay within the borders of the Crow country, and these half-vagabond Indians were notorious as petty thieves.

He ran at once for his pony, that was picketed near, quickly saddled and bridled it and hurried out of the grove.

As he cleared the timber he caught sight of the thief, a Blackfoot half-blood who had been lounging about the ranch all day. When he observed Dane, and realized that he was being pursued, he spurred his pony into its fastest gait and headed for the hills, among which lay the Crow village.

Dane gave a great shout, as he noticed the maneuver, and thundered in headlong chase.

The Blackfoot thumped his steed mercilessly, looking backward from time to time in a frightened way. He was, in a manner, a homeless outcast. For certain reasons he had left the tribe of his mother and taken up his abode with the Crows. The Crows only tolerated him in a half-hearted way, for there was no love lost between them and the Blackfeet; and the half-breed had few friends among the whites. Therefore, he had every reason to fear the vengeance of the cowboy, should he be overtaken.

As Dane drew near, however, shouting his commands and threats, the look of fear on the Blackfoot's face changed to one of dogged resolution. He loosened and drew his revolver from beneath the folds of his blanket. It was a rusty affair, but capable of execution; and the familiar click, as he drew back the hammer, added to his courage.

Dane saw the movement, and as the Blackfoot turned in the saddle, with the weapon half lifted, the cowboy's lasso shot through the air, tearing the revolver from the clinched, brown hand. Then, with a few quickened bounds, his pony leaped to the side of the other.

"You red villain!" the cowboy howled, leaning over and twining the fingers of his right hand in the blanket at the Indian's throat. "You would shoot a fellow for trying to get back his own, would you?"

The muscular grip tightened and the Indian was hurled to the ground.

Dane reined in almost instantly, leaped from his saddle, and faced the discomfited half-breed. The latter's pony, bearing the precious saddle, stopped when a few rods away and began to graze. The fact did not increase the Indian's good humor, for when he fell, he had hoped the cowboy would be led on in its pursuit.

"I ought to crack your head for this," cried Dane, but I'll let you down easy, if you'll just answer a few questions."

The Indian only grunted. He was in no mood for talking. The jar of the fall had bruised him somewhat and shaken the breath out of him.

"I know you," Dane continued. "You're Blackfoot Joe, and there ain't a bigger thief in this region. You hang up with the Crows, I understand, but I've an idea you know a good deal about a different set than the Crows."

The half-breed grunted again and turned away his face.

"Don't want to talk, eh? Then, I suppose, I'll have to make you."

He drew his revolver and twirled the cylinder around in a suggestive way.

"What want?" Joe asked, sulkily.

"You're a thief, Joe, or you wouldn't have hooked that saddle. Then you tried to shoot me, and that's attempted murder. You know what we do with thieves and murderers out here. If I take you back to the ranch, the boys will string you up in short order; and if the Crows choose to make a muss about it, the cowboys 'll clean out the village."

Blackfoot Joe shrugged his shoulders, indifferently.

"One thief is mighty apt to know the business

of other thieves," putting the revolver in its place and assuming a conciliatory air. "So, I take it you know something about the cattle-stealing that's worrying the Bitter Creek ranchmen. Spit it out, and I'll never say a word about this little affair."

"Don't know nothin'," Joe declared.

"Come, that won't do!" running his fingers impatiently through his pony's silky mane. "Bill Staples lost more than five hundred cows the past season, and other ranchmen in proportion. Not a hoof of 'em can be traced. They couldn't fly away; and they didn't tumble down a ledge, for I've searched the country over. If you'll tell me who got away with 'em, I'll give you the saddle you tried to steal. It's worth a hundred and fifty dollars."

The half-breed's eyes sparkled covetously.

"Was it your friends, the Crows? You don't owe them anything, Joe, according to all accounts."

The covetous look changed to a scowl at the recollection of the many petty insults the Crows had heaped on him. Nevertheless, Joe maintained an obstinate silence.

"Maybe it was whites," Dane went on, watching every expression in the moody face of the squatting Blackfoot. "If it was, and you'll show me their hiding-place, I'll throw this pony in with the saddle. Don't be in a hurry to say no. It's the best pony and saddle in the whole Yellowstone country."

"Me poor Injun," Joe whined. "Cowboy make fool of poor Injun."

"You're afraid I won't do it? Well, I'll trust you, Joe, further than you will me. Tell me who stole the cattle and where I can find 'em, and you can take the saddle and pony with you now. Only remember, if the thieves ain't where you say they are, I'll be hot on your trail as soon as I get back."

"Poor Injun don't know nothin'!" Joe persisted.

And from this position he could not be shaken, although Dane promised and stormed by turns for a full half-hour.

"Call up your pony and clear out of here!" the angry cowboy exclaimed at last. "You're a lying scoundrel, and I know it."

The Indian lazily turned his head and then gave utterance to a call which brought the pony quickly to his side.

The cowboy approached the animal, loosened the cinches, and tossed the silver-mounted saddle across the withers of his own steed.

"There's your brute. Now pick up your revolver and skeddaddle! If you attempt to use it, though, I'll put a hole through you."

The half-breed's eyes glittered angrily, but he obeyed without a protest. Without a backward glance, he mounted and rode away toward the Crow village.

"I expect I'm a fool for letting him off so easy!" Dane exclaimed, half-aloud, as he watched the single feather which nodded above the head of the disappearing Blackfoot. "But I make more by it than by uselessly corralling him."

CHAPTER II.

THE MAD HERMIT.

WHEN the Blackfoot's nodding feather had disappeared in a gully, Gideon Dane mounted and turned his pony's head toward the ranch.

As he did so he gave a start of surprise. Before him stood as singular a being as he had ever beheld. The stranger, who seemed to have risen out of the earth, was a tall, gaunt and white-haired man. An air of wildness hovered about him, and stone from his deeply-sunken black eyes. Moccasins were on his feet, a badger-skin cap surmounted his tangled and snowy locks, and his clothing, which was of tanned and untanned skins, seemed of his own make and fashioning. His arms were folded across the muzzle of a long rifle, and a look of questioning melancholy rested on his face.

A stronger contrast than that presented by the two men would be difficult to find. The cowboy was in the vigor of young manhood, and the buoyant alertness of youth was revealed in every action.

That the stranger had taken him so unawares nettled him.

"A regular hermit-looking cuss," he decided, "and mad as a March hare, or I miss my guess. I wonder how he managed to slip on me that way?"

The other now approached, with the long rifle thrown into the hollow of his arm. When within a few feet he bent forward.

"No; it ain't him!" he muttered, speaking to himself as he looked into Dane's face. "It ain't him!"

"Who might you be searching for, pardner?" Dane asked, startled in spite of himself.

The stranger straightened up, as if suddenly recalled to his surroundings.

"Eh? My name's Featherstone. Joel Featherstone; and I'm huntin' fer him. I don't know his name, but I'll know his face if I ever see it. Yes; jes' as it looked in the flame an' smoke of that night. I reckon you never had your heart burnt out, stranger? Mine was, then! An' the tears I ort to have shed have filled its place sence, an' turned to a stone."

"Hadr't you better go up to the ranch with me?" Dane questioned, now fully convinced that the man was mad. "We've got a nice place up there, and we'll treat you well."

Featherstone again folded his arms over the muzzle of his rifle, and shook his head.

"Not till I find him, stranger. There ain't any rest or peace fer me till then. As fer the ranch, I've been there. Not at the house, but around it. I took a look at the men, but he wasn't among 'em."

His eye rested inquiringly on the saddle strung across the pony's withers. Apparently he had noticed it for the first time.

"I just overtook a sneaking red who was making off with it," Dane explained.

"Yes, I saw him. He went by me while I was layin' among the rocks over there. There were Injuns that night, too. Maby I'll have to foller him."

"Better come to the ranch!" Dane urged.

"No, I couldn't! There ain't been a roof over my head sence that night. I live in the caves an' rocks. Houses an' men make me think of snakes an' their dens. There's nothin' true an' comfortin' like the rocks an' the blue sky. My heart goes back to tears sometimes, when I lay awake of nights an' talk to them."

The cowboy was touched by the simple pathos of the statement.

"If you'll come with me, Featherstone, I'll help you find the chap you're hunting. I'm trying to look up a lot of scaly fellows, and maybe we'll find your man among them."

A sudden hope lighted the eyes of the mad hermit. But it died away as quickly as it had come.

"No; I must make the hunt alone. You look well, but I couldn't trust you!"

As he said it, a half-growl showed his set teeth. Then he tossed the rifle into the hollow of his arm, turned abruptly, and stalked away.

"Mad ain't no name for it," Dane asserted, urging his horse forward. "There never was a worse one out of the asylum. Queer how people go off sometimes on a tack like that."

"Jeems's rivers!"

The exclamation was drawn from him by a volley of shots and a chorus of yells. They came from a valley, half a mile to his right. He instantly wheeled his horse in that direction. No more shots were heard, but the yells continued, and when he reached the summit of the intervening rise the exciting cause became apparent.

A dozen cowboys were spurring in hot chase after half that number of well-mounted men. The cowboys were from the Bitter Creek Ranch. A score of partially stampeded cattle were scattering over the valley, and from this Dane knew that the pursued men were cattle-thieves.

He reddened with indignation as this knowledge was thrust upon him. And it humiliated as well as angered him. He had come to the Bitter Creek country for the purpose of preventing just such operations; yet here the thieves had cut out a bunch of cattle under his very nose! And they might have made off with them in safety if the cowboys had not come unexpectedly upon them.

Dane gave his pony free rein, drew his revolver, and added his shouts to those of the others.

It was a wild, mad run, over a rocky and broken country, where a false step might precipitate a rider to his death. But neither the pursuers nor the pursued heeded this.

It was plain from the start that the cowboys' ponies were no matches for those ridden by the cattle brigands. Dane's pony, however, was remarkably fast, and he soon found himself leading the chase.

When two miles had been covered he was so far in advance of the others that it seemed folly for him to continue on. Should he overtake the thieves he could not cope with them single-handed. Nevertheless, he spurred forward as furiously as ever, impelled by the thought that he might thus be led to the secret hiding-place of the pests of the plains.

A mile further the pursued shifted their course, and a rocky wall soon hid them from view.

When Dane drew near the point where they had vanished a bullet hurtled past his head, fired from the angle of the wall.

"They have made a stand!" he ejaculated, crowding his laboring pony into the encroaching bushes. "Now, if the boys were only here!"

But, the "boys" were far behind, and so scattered he could not hope to mass them very soon. Finally, after much vain chafing, he rode back along the trail, re-entered the bushes and approached the wall from a different direction.

"They're gone!" he cried, when he could see into the pass and valley beyond it.

It was true. The shot had been part of a clever ruse designed to cover the retreat of the fugitives. While he was making the detour they had passed from sight.

"That's what I call mean!" he asserted, admiring the shrewdness of the scheme notwithstanding the fact that it had completely baffled his hopes. "But, maybe the rascals have hid themselves and their horses somewhere in the bushes?"

This was a possibility and he examined his weapons carefully as he galloped forward for a survey. Neither men nor horses were to be seen; and by the time he had finished the search the foremost cowboy rode up.

The others arrived at irregular intervals, and when they were all gathered in the pass a systematic search was commenced. But, nothing came of it. Openings led in all directions from the valley toward the mountains, and the ground was so stony and hard that the hoof-prints of the horses could not be followed.

"We'll have to give it up," confessed Dane, despairingly, after an hour's hard work. "One might as well try to trail a flock of birds."

Then the signal was given and the weary and discomfited cowboys turned their jaded ponies homeward.

CHAPTER III.

A LOVE AFFAIR.

BILL STAPLES, the owner of the Bitter Creek Ranch, was lazily whipping his big boots when Gideon Dane entered his room on the afternoon of the following day. The ranchman was a bearded six-footer and a typical old-time cattleman. He had evidently been in a brown study, for he looked up in an absent way as Dane stalked in.

"Hain't found out anything yit, I reckon?" he questioned. "Them cussed cattle-thieves air nigh about worrying the life out of me."

"Nothing for certain," Detective Gid replied, seating himself in a careless attitude. "But I've been hammering at a theory, and I think there's something in it. Yesterday's work convinced me that we can't hope to trail those fellows. So, we'll have to go at it in some other way."

Staples looked at him keenly and nodded.

"I couldn't squeeze anything out of Blackfoot Joe, but I'm satisfied he knows the whole secret. He lives with the Crows. There are said to be vast valleys beyond the Crow country. Still, nobody seems to know for certain what there is back there."

"But no one can git through the mountains in that direction. There ain't any passes, so the cowboys say; an' it stands to reason the thieves couldn't drive the cattle over the rocks."

"Good, as far as it goes. But, because a pass has never been found don't prove that there are none. This morning I went out to the valley where the thieves disappeared, and after hunting around an hour or two stumbled onto a canyon that seemed to offer something. I followed it up till it ended in a kind of pocket. A narrow ledge led from this. Cattle couldn't be driven along the ledge, but the thieves may have escaped that way, and I intend to investigate it."

"I want to go over to Conner's first, though. Old man Conner has tramped about this country a good deal in his trading business, and may be able to tell me something."

Staples smiled.

"Air you sure, now, it ain't his daughter you want to git to tell you somethin'? That's a nice gal, Gid, an' I don't blame you; but I do hope you won't low her to rope ye tell ye git this cattle bizness settled. Bizness fore folly, allus, my boy. Remember that, an' you have my blessin'."

Gideon flushed, stammered, and again spoke of the cattle-thieves.

"Hit hard, eh? Yes, them fellers air pizen critters! If you can corral 'em you'll have the thanks an' pocketbooks of every ranchman along the Yallerstone."

"I'll do it sooner or later," the cowboy assert-

ed, determinedly. "You know the old saying: 'The pitcher that goes often to the well gets broke at last.'"

"An' the feller that goes often to Conner's will git roped at last."

"You didn't let me finish my statement!" with an attempt at a smile. "The point I wanted to make was, the rustlers can't keep up their thieving and not get caught. They're certain to leave some kind of a trail, sooner or later."

"Do you know, I think them Crows air mixed up in it?" Staples asserted, stretching out his long legs. "They're a lazy, sneakin', stealin' set, an' I, fer one, wouldn't put nothin' past 'em. A geniwine, no-count Crow is the meanest vagabone on the face of this hyer earth. I do believe they'd sell their totems fer a drink, an' a Crow thinks a blame sight more of his totem than he does of his squaw or his boss."

"I've thought the same. But ain't they too cowardly to run such risks?"

"Not if they was backed by a set of pizen whites. The Blackfoot, you said, acted like he knowed a good deal. If the Crows air into it, of course they couldn't very well keep it from him. If they ain't into it, he wouldn't be apt to know anything of the bizness."

"I guess I didn't say anything to you about the queer fellow I had a talk with yesterday?" Dane questioned, as a sudden recollection of the Mad Hermit came to him. "He called himself Featherstone, and is the oddest chap I've yet struck in these regions."

"I've heard o' him," admitted Staples, after the cowboy had given a hurried account of Featherstone's appearance and actions. "But, I didn't know he was in this section. He's crazy as a loon, I guess, an's been that way fer years. I never quite heard the straight of his story. He lived north, somewhere, it seems, an' one night his shanty was burnt and his wife killed er carried off. He's been huntin' fer the feller that done it ever sence. Likely the scoundrel's dead; but I suppose Featherstone 'll go on huntin' him till he's dead too."

"I ought to have known my sudden suspicion was foolish," Dane averred, toying thoughtfully with his wide-brimmed hat.

The ranchman stared.

"The idea came to me that he might be one of the thieves and playing a part," the cowboy explained.

"No. He's jes' what he seems to be, jedgin' from all reports."

"Well, I'm glad of it!" Gideon declared, rising to depart. "It won't hurt me to believe any man could play so base a game."

He went from the house to the horse-corral, and, a little later, rode away in the direction of the hills.

The Bitter Creek Ranch consisted of a vast extent of river, valley, mesa and mountain, and encroached on the territory of the Crows, which lay to the northwest. The village of the Crows was situated on the opposite side of the divide, and the cabin of Hank Conner, the Indian trader, nestled in a gorge in the intervening hills.

The cowboy had spoken the truth when he said he hoped to learn something from Conner. Conner, as a trader in furs and pelts, was on terms of intimacy with the Indians, and would probably know something of the movements of Blackfoot Joe. He might also know something about the vast valley which rumor located beyond the Crow village. As Staples suspected, however, the main object of the Cowboy Detective's visit was to see pretty Nellie Conner.

When he reached the gorge, he hitched his pony under the sheltering trees and walked up the little bridle-path leading to the cabin. The home of the Conners was an unpretentious affair, but its exterior and interior showed that a woman presided over it.

A momentary glimpse of an open window revealed a rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed girl seated near it, busily sewing. Then Dane stepped from behind the screening bushes, lifted his big, white hat and bowed.

"Gid Dane, you like to 'a' scared me to death!" she exclaimed, as his shadow fell across the window.

The startled flush on her cheeks added to her beauty.

"I beg pardon, then," he said; and advanced as she tossed aside her work and hurried to greet him.

The smile that had driven away the flush showed that the handsome young cowboy held her heart in his keeping.

"Nobody around, I guess!" he said, kissing her as he stepped across the threshold.

"If there was you wouldn't dare to do that!"

she declared, giving him a chair and retreating to her position by the window.

"Probably not, but I'd be tempted to, just the same. Where's your father?"

"Gone to the Crow village."

"Well, I'm both glad and sorry. I wanted to see him, but I wanted to see you more. I wish, while he's over there, he'd round up a certain rascal known as Blackfoot Joe. The fellow tried to steal my saddle, yesterday."

"Do you know, Gid," poising her needle in mid-air, "I've always said that Indian was a thief!"

"So you know him?"

"Know him? Why, he's been here many a time. Father's well-acquainted with him, and brings him over to meals, now and then."

"Well, if you know so much, maybe you know something about Featherstone, the Mad Hermit?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head negatively.

"I'm very glad father isn't here," she declared, speaking very earnestly, a little later.

"Why?" Dane questioned, drawing his chair close to hers, as she cast down her eyes in a troubled way.

"You've heard of Donald Knowlton?"

"The rich cattle-king, who lives a dozen miles or so down the river?"

"Yes."

"I know something of him. He belongs to the cattlemen's league, I'm working for."

"I didn't know that. Anyway, he's no friend of yours. He spoke to father about me, last week; and has been to see me twice, since that time."

Her face colored from embarrassment.

"I think I understand you," returned Dane, taking one of her hands in his. "Knowlton's got a gilded cage in Denver or some such place, I suppose, and wants a bird for it. And he has chosen a bird that don't want to go. In fact, one that has promised to go somewhere else."

She blushed as she unresistingly yielded her hand.

"That isn't the worst, Gid. Father has made promises to him for me. He is taken with the idea that Knowlton is rich and insists that I must marry him. I told him I wouldn't, and he—"

She began to sob and could not complete the sentence.

Dane placed his arm about her and kissed her again.

"And what?"

"He declared that you must not come here, again, and that if you did he would shoot you or, sight."

"Your father said that?"

"Yes, Gid; and, from the way he looked, I fear he will do it."

"He will be home this evening, I suppose?"

"Yes, but you mustn't stay to meet him, Gid. I could never forgive myself if anything should happen to either of you. And father has such a temper, when aroused! You must not try to see me again until I tell you you may. You can leave a letter for me once a week at Staples's ranch, and I will manage to get it. At the same time I will leave one there for you. That's as much as we'll dare to do at present."

Dane was inclined to demur to this arrangement, but pretty Nellie Conner was firm.

"Now you must go," she announced. "It won't do for you to stay any longer. I wouldn't have it known that you were here this afternoon, for anything."

"Another kiss, then, sweetheart!" assuming an air of levity, "and remember,

"I'll be true to my love, if my love'll be true to me!"

And singing this line of an old love-song, he retreated through the doorway, and walked slowly down the narrow path to the point where he had hitched his horse.

CHAPTER IV.

SHOT FROM AMBUSH.

NELLIE CONNER watched her lover until his form was hidden by the trees. Tears were in her eyes when she turned again to the window and attempted to resume her work. Her acquaintance with Gideon Dane had not been of long duration, but it had ripened into perfect love; and when her father commanded her to dismiss him in favor of Knowlton, it aroused in her an unwonted feeling of rebellion. Until then she had never deceived him nor resisted his wishes.

Her thoughts were troubled ones, as she mechanically plied her needle. She had disobediently arranged for a clandestine correspondence. Besides, knowing her father as well as she did,

she feared for Dane's life should they chance to meet that evening.

An hour later, when her father staggered to the door, the blood trickling from an ugly wound on his head and crimsoning his garments, her worst fears sprung full-armed upon her.

"Why, what is the matter?" she asked trembling as she hurried to meet him.

"That cussed Gid Dane!" he growled, sinking limply to a seat on the door-sill. "He's done me up I'm afeard."

Then, in answer to her questioning exclamations:

"He laid for me in a thicket, down the gorge. I was comin' along, when he shot me same as he would a kiote. The ball cut through there," tapping his head, "an' I went down like a house a-fallin'. I didn't know anything fer nigh a minit. But, when I did come 'round, I seen him makin' off as if the devil was after him."

"Oh, it couldn't have been Gid!" Nellie declared, wringing her hands in a helpless way. "He wasn't on that trail."

"Eh?"

He looked at her closely, a sudden suspicion aroused in his mind.

"He was hyer this afternoon, was he?"

She paled, and trembled more violently than before.

"No lies, Nell! I can see from your looks that he's been hyer ag'in. An' this is what comes of it. He laid for me while he was mad, thinkin' if the ole man was out of the way, he wouldn't have any funder trouble in corraling the gal."

"We'll not talk about it, father, for I won't believe he did it. Come into the house, please, and let me bandage your head. It's been bleedin' terribly."

"You won't believe it, eh?" he snarled, staggering to his feet and following her into the room. "That's purty tough, Nell. An' to your own father!"

"Oh, I can't believe it!" she moaned. "I don't mean to dispute your word. But you must have been mistaken. Some one else fired at you. It wasn't Gid Dane."

She placed a chair for him, then hurriedly tore some strips of old muslin and rolled them into bandages.

"But I seen him!" he asserted, doggedly, as she applied these. "And he pulled on me for keeps. Look at that bullet-hole, will ye? An' inch to the right an' I'd 'a' been a dead man."

Her fingers moved deftly, while he talked, and the bandages were soon in place. Protestations of Dane's innocence seemed useless.

"Hark ye, Nell! You told him he couldn't come ag'in, I reckon?"

His form was half concealed in the deepening shadows, and his face looked ghoully as it peered from beneath the bandages.

"For the present, yes!" trimming a lamp preparatory to lighting it. "I told him what you said. I didn't mean to say anything about his being here, but you guessed it; and besides, it proves to me he never fired that shot. He went down the east trail."

"Proves fiddlesticks! Why, Nell, do you suppose he'd be fool enough to let you know what he meant to do? Of course he went down the east trail, but, then he slipped across to the other."

"But he couldn't get his horse across," she insisted.

"Who said he had a boss?" with impatient emphasis. "I'm shore I didn't."

"But I thought—"

"Yes, bein' bound an' determined not to believe me, you're likely to think 'most anything."

He seldom spoke to her so harshly and the words fell with crushing weight. But she strove to bear up bravely as she arranged the table for the evening meal.

Conner watched her craftily, an evil light in his eyes. The story he had told was partly true and partly false. He had been shot from ambush, but he had not seen the would-be assassin. He had hoped by asserting that Dane was the miscreant, to turn Nellie against her lover. He had failed and it angered him.

Although a rough, Indian trader, partially uncivilized by his wild life, he had, so far as Nellie could remember, always treated her with kindness and consideration. She believed that, in his rude way, he loved her; and she returned this love with obedience and filial respect. Their wishes had seldom clashed, but now she had set herself in array against him and discord was the result.

"You're acting sillier than I ever knew you to, Nell!" he ventured, breaking the silence. "This Gid Dane's nothin' but a common cowboy an' not fit fer you, anyway. I can't for

the life of me see whatever made ye take such a fancy to him. Now, there's Knowlton. He's a smarter man'n Dane, better lookin' to my notion, an's wu'th a mint o' money. An' he thinks more o' you, Nell, a good 'eal, than he does of his thousands er of his big cattle-ranch. 'Most any gal in the West would snap at him jes' like a trout at a fly."

To his great disappointment, she did not reply.

"Yer old dad can't live forever, Nell. I'm a-feelin' purty shaky, lately, an' this bullet-mark may be a plaguey sight worse'n it looks. If I should go sudden, at any time, it'd be a comfort to me to know you was well fixed. That's why I'm anxious to have ye married to Knowlton. It's a pity ye've took a fancy to this Gid Dane. He's too young and coltish to make any woman a good husband, an' too everlastin' pore to support a wife, if he had one."

"I can't marry Knowlton, father," she protested. "His presence is unendurable to me; and, besides, he is twice my age."

"He's old enough to have some sense, Nell. That's more to the pint. An' there's another thing. My Injun tradin's been a losin' bizness fer more'n a year. The last lot o' pelts I sent down the river didn't pay the expense of the trip. What's to 'come of us, if this season's as bad, is more'n I can tell."

"Fer a good while it's been touch an' go with me to git enough fer us to eat an' some clo'es fer you. I've never said nothin' about it till now, knowin' it would make you feel bad an' could do no good. If ye marry Knowlton it'll be providin' a good home fer you an' me fer the rest o' our lives."

"And you want to sell me in that way, father!"

The girl's face flamed with indignation. The next instant she threw herself into a chair by the window and began to sob like a child.

"Tut, tut, Nell!" in an alarmed and agitated voice. "What'd I say to make you drop down that way?"

It would have been difficult for her to explain the cause. A flood of memories had quenched the hot fire of her anger. There was the time when he had nursed her through a lingering fever. He had tenderly carried her home on his back when the colt threw her and twisted her ankle. Dozens of times he had brought her trinkets and presents from trading-posts, beaded moccasins and Indian finery from the Crows and Blackfeet, and more valuable articles of wearing apparel from the far cities of civilization. And, besides, she owed him a daughter's love.

"Give me time to think it over, father," she pleaded. "Don't hurry me, and it may be I can do as you say. I didn't know we were so poor. I would do anything to help you. But that! How can I ever do that?"

A pleased grin spread over Conner's face.

"Have yer way, Nell. I won't push ye. I knowed all the time that you was a gal that wouldn't disobey her dad. We won't talk any more about it to-night. My head's thumpin' fit to split; an' I guess I'll have to lay down an' let the supper go. I'm afeard this wound's goin' to prove a serious affair."

Then with another pleased grin and a sidelong glance at the bowed head, he stumbled into the adjoining room, which was his sleeping apartment.

CHAPTER V.

IN MID-AIR.

THREE days later, the Cowboy Detective had another consultation with Bill Staples, and at its conclusion started for the gorge he had discovered while searching for the cattle-thieves.

Staples had offered to send a number of cowboys with him, but Dane insisted on going alone.

"I can get along better by myself," he had said. "If I find out anything I can come back for the cowboys. A crowd would only interfere with work, now. I've an idea I'll have to do a lot of close hiding. And one can do that easier than twenty."

"P'raps you're right," Staples assented, waving him an adieu as he galloped away.

Gideon knew that a difficult undertaking lay before him. To trail a band of desperate men to their secret haunts required courage, discretion and fortitude. And at the end of the trail hot fighting might occur. For this he was well prepared, being superbly mounted and heavily armed. In addition, his trusty lasso was coiled at the silver-plated saddle-bow.

"If I could only see Nell!" he muttered, half-tempted to ride by Conner's cabin on the way.

But he had promised to refrain from calling

on her until she sent him word, and he dared not break that promise.

"If Conner wasn't her father, I'd call him an old chump. I suppose he thinks I'm staying away because I'm afraid of him. Well, he never was more mistaken in his life. And that scoundrel, Knowlton! If I should give him a drag at the heels of my pony it might put some sense into his swelled head. Money isn't everything, though a good many people seem to think so."

A ride of two or three hours brought him to the timber-shaded gorge. A half-blind trail wound among the scrub at its bottom. Evidently it had been traversed at some time, but whether by man or beast was hard to say.

"Two chances to one I'll fetch up against a grizzly," thought Dane, as his pony slowly picked its way along the difficult route. "A nasty place for a brush with Bruin. Old fellow, it would take some lively scratching to get out of here."

He patted the pony's neck, and looked anxiously ahead.

But no grizzly was encountered, and after a long and toilsome scramble they reached the arroya-like end of the gorge.

Here the Cowboy Detective dismounted, and taking the bridle-rein in his hand, carefully led the pony up the steep incline. It was twenty feet to the narrow ledge above, which, viewed from below, seemed almost inaccessible to a horse. But Dane's mountain-bred pony was sure-footed and could climb like a goat; and after a vigorous effort, during which stones and pebbles fell in showers, it stood panting and trembling on the firm rock.

"Good boy!" said Dane, stroking the arched neck. "I knew you could make it. I am sure other horses have been up here, and you can go where any of them can."

The pony rubbed his velvety nose against his master's arm as if he understood the compliment. Then the cowboy swung himself again into the saddle, and the animal moved forward along the narrow pathway.

A grand, but bewildering extent of wild mountain scenery opened before the cowboy as he ascended higher and higher. Castle-like cliffs, battlemented and scarred, outlined themselves here and there. Vast canyons seamed the rocks, and peaks towered skyward from the vertebra of the range.

The greater portion of the ledge he was traversing hung outward from the face of the mountain, the shale beneath it having been worn away by time and the elements. Thus it formed a table-like shelf, overhanging a precipitous canyon. The opposite wall of the canyon presented an almost perpendicular face of granite. At some points, however, it was broken, and lined with trees.

"This will take me not far from the Crow village," thought Cowboy Gid, as he noted the trend of the canyon. "That helps to support Staples' opinion. Those Crows are a rascally lot, sure. The thieves couldn't hide the cattle in the village, though. If there is a valley beyond I shall have to think they know something about the stealing. I almost wish I had placed Blackfoot Joe under arrest. I might have squeezed some information out of him by taking him to the ranch."

The ledge was becoming exceedingly narrow, and the pony moved with great care and deliberation, as if knowing the danger of a slip or mis-step. At a point where the ledge swung around a bend, it sniffed the air suspiciously, and came to a full stop.

"Hullo! What now?" closely scanning the narrow path, and also the bottom of the canyon.

The ledge had a decidedly dangerous slope, but he believed the pony could pass it in safety. The bottom of the canyon seemed a smooth surface of grayish, white rock.

"A bad place to fall from, eh, my boy? But you will not fall. You've gone 'round worse places."

Then he touched the pony lightly with the spur and urged it on. The animal trembled, advanced a few steps, and then gave a great bound as if to clear some obstruction. As it came down its feet slipped from under it and it shot into space. Then Dane felt himself falling with a swift rush into the canyon.

A thrill of terror, such as he had never known, seized him and choked the cry that welled to his lips. The next instant the pony struck; but the shock which Dane expected did not occur.

What had seemed the grayish white of a rocky bottom proved to be the crusted coating on the surface of an alkali sink. Into this the pony had fallen feet-foremost, with a slushing, sucking sound, filling the air with a perfect

shower of the gluey mud. Its weight and the force of the fall sunk it at once to its mid-sides; and its instantaneous and frantic struggles only served to sink it deeper.

The down-rush through the air and the jolt took away Cowboy Gid's breath. For a moment he was confused, and scarcely knew what had happened. Then his wits came back, and the full peril of his position was forced upon him. The pony was sinking deeper at every movement, and it was plain it could never escape from the grip of the tenacious mud.

He looked about appealingly. There was no sign of either human or animal life. On one side, the side from which he had fallen, the wall inclined toward and above him, and terminated in the rocky point over which wound the ledge. On the opposite side the perpendicular wall was broken and jagged and supported a growth of bushy trees.

The canyon was not wide, and as his eye lighted on the projecting finger of rock above, a sudden hope came to him. He had partially drawn his feet out of the ooze, but his limbs were still submerged almost to the tops of his boots. With great difficulty he succeeded in extricating them. Then he planted the mud-bedaubed boots in the seat of the saddle, steadied himself with his hands, and carefully arose to a standing position.

The pony still struggled, but its movements were feebler; and as it turned its head toward him the cowboy fancied that there lay in its eyes a look of almost human despair.

"Steady, old boy!" he cried encouragingly. "Maybe if I can get my weight off your back, you can make it after all."

As he said it, he drew his knife and cut the *riata* from the saddle-bow. Then he coiled it with deft quickness, balanced himself firmly and cautiously, and hurled the noose at the rock above.

The motion caused the pony to recommence its efforts to escape and almost tumbled Gid into the coze. But the noose caught, and he was able to steady himself by a downward pull on the rope. The point was about thirty feet above him, but as the rope was an unusually long one he had plenty of slack.

Again drawing his knife, he severed the two girths of the saddle; and stepping lightly to the pony's haunches, lifted the saddle from its back. Then he passed the end of the rope beneath the saddle, gave it a turn or hitch about the horn, and tied it to the rope as high up as he could reach. Thus he had formed a sort of loop or swing, in which the saddle sat as if on a horse's back.

The poor pony had been plunging all the while, dipping its nose occasionally into the suffocating mass, and sinking itself steadily to its death.

As soon as the saddle was properly secured Dane climbed carefully into it. He had fastened it as high as he could reach and could now stretch out his legs without thrusting his feet into the alkali.

"Try it again!" he shouted to the pony. "Get up there! Hoop-la! Go-o-long!"

Thus encouraged, the poor brute made another desperate surge, rising half out of the mud in its tremendous effort; then it fell exhausted. Another struggle, feebler than the last, served only to hasten its submergence. Then, as the mud mounted over its back, it ceased all movement and quickly sunk from sight.

"Poor pony!" whispered the Cowboy Detective, with lips tremulous and cheeks blanched. "You made a gallant fight, anyway. You knew more than I did. If I hadn't been a fool I would never have tried to force you around that bend."

CHAPTER VI.

A DESPERATE SITUATION.

He looked about him and then at the rock above.

"If I was a monkey, or a sailor, I might climb this rope. But climbing isn't a cowboy's best hold. I will have to find some other plan, if I ever get out of this."

His movements had set the saddle to oscillating.

"Now, there's an idea," measuring the width of the canyon with his eye. "Maybe I can swing myself to the other side!"

He rose to a standing position, with his feet resting firmly in the seat of the saddle; and, holding tightly to the rope with his hands, he began the pumping motion used by a swinger. As he did so a pebble fell from the rock above, and with a gasp of dismay he desisted.

"That won't do!" speaking in a husky, hollow voice. "I'll pull the noose off the rock and go slap into the alkali."

There was great danger of that, for the noose

had slipped a little and displaced the pebble. But after another survey of his surroundings he was convinced that his only chance of escape lay in swinging himself into the bushes on the opposite side.

"If I could but get a foot against the wall at my back, I believe I could make it," he muttered. "But there's the rub. It is half as far to that side as it is to the other."

He again commenced the pumping motion, closely watching the noose above as he did so. It did not slip this time; and as his courage arose he swung himself out boldly.

"I have got to make it! It's life or death with me, now."

The motion increased until the rope and saddle described the curve of a gigantic pendulum. Then Dane's foot touched the wall at his back; and, exerting all his strength, he propelled the swing with bird-like speed through the air. There was a rasping sound as the noose left the rock, torn from its place by the outward pull of the rope. But the momentum of the swinger was so great that he was hurled with stunning force among the clefts where the bushes were growing.

The saddle served to break the force of the fall, though he was considerably bruised and shaken up.

"No bones broke, anyway, and I'm safe from that villainous hole. My! But I'm shaking like a leaf. I wouldn't go through that again for the best ranch on the Yellowstone."

Then, glancing at the ledge above:

"I wonder what made the pony act so queer! He ought to have gone 'round that bend, easy. He jumped just as if he'd been struck by a rattler. I'll have to look into that. First place, though, I must see how to get out of here, or if I can get out at all."

The trees grew at irregular intervals along the precipitous wall, and he made a careful estimate of their distances from each other, and marked the points where the ascents seemed the easiest. Gid then dragged the saddle to a place where it could not be seen from the ledge, and covered it with leaves and boughs to protect it from sun and dew and screen it from the gaze of any prowling animal.

Having performed this to his satisfaction, the cowboy gathered up his lasso and made his way to a location favorable for a cast. Here he hurled the noose over a projecting bowlder, and by planting his feet in the niches of the wall managed to drag himself up to it. In the same manner he reached an overhanging bush; and from that worked by slow degrees to the top of the precipice.

Another ledge ran along here, far above the one he had followed, however. It led in the same direction and he had little doubt it would serve his purpose equally as well. But he wished to examine the place from which the pony had fallen; and after moving along it for a half-mile, he found a series of terraces and again descended into the canyon, the bed of which at that point was hard and firm.

Here the difficult feat of mounting to the opposite, low-lying ledge presented itself, but Gid accomplished it after much hard work, and then made his way back to the perilous bend.

"Soap!"

The exclamation followed a cry of astonishment.

The angle of the trail was covered with a thick coating of dirty, rock-colored soft soap! Over it had been strewn a mass of pebbles and shale, giving it a very deceptive appearance. The pony had scented the soap, and, when urged forward, had tried to leap it, but had fallen short, and so, been hurled to its death. Furrows in the soapy surface showed where its feet had slipped and plowed their way to the edge of the precipice.

"That's as mean a trick as I ever saw," Cowboy Gid asserted. "The work of a regular devil. The man that would do that would do anything. The thieves must have knowed I was following them, and fixed that as a trap."

He peered down into the alkali sink, the surface of which was still muddy-looking at the point where the pony had gone down.

"I wonder if any other fellow ever went over there?"

Dane started as he asked himself the question. He was not the first who had tried to trail the cattle-thieves to their lair. Several well-known cowboys of the Yellowstone had attempted it and never been heard of afterward. He shuddered as he recalled the names of these men, and looked again into the place which was probably their common grave, and which came so near being his.

A wild cry, which ended in a burst of cackling

laughter, aroused and startled him. Looking in the direction from whence it came, he saw Featherstone peering at him from a rift in the rocks. As he looked, the face was withdrawn, and, a moment later, the gaunt form of the hermit came into view.

"Found it, did ye?" he asked, the ghost of a smile flitting across his seamed visage. "Ye're bound to find it ef ye follow that trail. I run onto it yisterday. Slicker'n b'ar's 'ile, hain't it?"

He had nimbly gained the cowboy's side, and was looking down on the soapy ledge.

"Where did you come from?" Dane stammered, a dark suspicion crossing his mind.

"From everywhur, nighabouts," declared the strange madman, who, singularly enough, seemed in a talkative mood. "You might as well ask the wind or the birds. I've been up an' down, up an' down, on the earth an' in the air. I could tell ye better where I hain't been."

"Maybe you know who put that there, then?"

"The Injuns, mebber. I've seen a pile of 'em in the last two days. Er it might 'a' been him?"

"Then you don't really know?" looking the hermit squarely in the eyes.

"How should I? I come down this way after I met you. Let's see; when was that? Was it last week, er yisterday? I come down here, as I say, an' when I got to this place I climbed around it over the rocks, jes' as I was doin' 'while ago when I heered you talkin'."

"And you are on your way back, then?"

"Yes; frum the Crow village, an' frum the rock gateway that leads to the canyon which no man can cross. There's a smoke 'other side of it an' a valley. I seen the smoke frum the hills, back here, an' tried to git to it, but the canyon was in the way. Then I went to the Crow village."

Dane stared at Featherstone, wondering if the latter's statements were entitled to credence, or were merely the emanations of an unbinged brain. What did he mean by the rocky gateway, the impassable canyon, and the mysterious smoke?

"And what did you find at the village?"

"He wasn't there!" shaking his head sadly.

"No; I s'pose not. But you found something?"

"Yes, one thing. No Crow ever goes into the enchanted valley. That's what they call it, whur the smoke rises. No Crow except the medicine-man. He goes to make totems and charms. How he goes no one can tell. I can fly, sometimes, but I couldn't fly across the canyon which no man can cross."

"I tell you what," said Dane, speaking, as he hoped, in a tone to win the confidence of the Mad Hermit. "I'm going into that valley. If you'll show me the way to it, we'll manage to cross the canyon, somehow or other. Who knows? Maybe the man you're hunting for is there. So, you see, while you are helping me I'll be helping you."

"Not now!" with a decided shake of the head.

"I must look for him there."

He pointed a lean finger along the trail which Dane had lately traversed.

"He is not in the Crow village. He is not in the enchanted valley. Was it in my dreams I seen him? Whur was it? Oh, my God, whur was it?"

He pressed a hand to his brow and stared about in a wild and bewildered way.

"He can't be back there!" said Dane, soothingly. "Show me the way to the enchanted valley."

"But I seen him! I seen him!" screamed the unhappy man.

Then, as he again became quiet:

"Straight ahead! Straight ahead! Up the canyon! The rock gateway, the black gorge, the enchanted valley!"

The old, fierce wildness was shaking him again; the harsh, cackling laugh broke again from his lips; and, with a swing of his long rifle, he wheeled abruptly and fled up the precipitous slope.

CHAPTER VII.

A SCHEMING TRIO.

LATE in the evening of the day on which the Cattle-Range Detective had his second meeting with the Mad Hermit, Donald Knowlton, accompanied by Blackfoot Joe, approached the cabin of Hank Conner.

Nellie was displeased as well as startled when she saw them. Conner was away, and she so detested and feared Knowlton that she never liked to meet him during her father's absence. That he was accompanied by Blackfoot Joe did not serve to raise Knowlton in her estimation.

for, since hearing Dane's story of the attempted theft of the saddle, she had regarded the half-breed as an irresponsible and dangerous character.

"Good-evening," said Knowlton, lifting his heavy hat and bowing politely.

Nellie returned the greeting, addressing the Indian rather than the ranchman; at which Joe grinned broadly and Knowlton frowned.

"Will you come into the house, or would you prefer chairs out there?" pushing a couple of chairs toward the door.

"Injun set outside an' smoke!" was Joe's prompt answer; and he produced a pipe and plumped himself down on the doorstep.

"Your father isn't at home, I see!" and Knowlton's eyes swept the room, as he halted confusedly. "H'm! Yes; I believe I'll come in."

He stepped by the chairs, turned one of them about and occupied it, and placed his big hat on the floor at his side.

He was a man of middle age, with some pretensions to education; but a coarse and sensual nature was revealed in his burly form and heavy, red face.

"I suppose you'll be here for supper, Mr. Knowlton?" and Nellie balanced a fork across her forefinger as if weighing the amount that would probably be required to fill the capacious stomachs of the two men.

Knowlton had been twisting uneasily, and the girl's manner did not tend to restore his equanimity.

"H'm! Yes. That is, no! I—I don't think we'll stay for supper. Anyway, you needn't prepare anything. I just wanted to see your father, and—have a short talk with you, Miss Nellie."

At this she took a seat near the window and folded her hands in her lap, in a manner that was very demure and precise, but terribly exasperating to the enamored ranchman.

"Curse the girl!" muttered Knowlton, under his breath. "She's trying herself this evening. If she's ever Mrs. Knowlton, I'll teach her better manners than that."

Then aloud:

"I reckon you haven't forgot, Miss Nellie, what I spoke about t'other night?"

"Was it the waterfall down the canyon?" tapping her foot and arching her brows, innocently.

"No!" roared Knowlton, unable to restrain himself. "You know what I mean, Nellie Conner."

"Then it was the grizzly which Cinnamon Jake roped last week out on the mesa?"

"See here, Nellie!" the leonine roar softening into a dove-like coo. "You can't make me mad if you want to; I've made up my mind to that. And there ain't any need of us fighting shy of each other or quarreling. I want you for a wife. That's the plain English of it. I don't know how to mix my talk up with sugar and honey, like some men; but you'll find me as straight as any of 'em. And if I do say it myself, I'd make as good a husband."

The girl busied herself with folding and unfolding the hem of her apron, but said not a word in reply.

"Most girls set great store by money and the fine things it will buy," plunging on in a sort of fever of recklessness and haste. "If you're that kind I can promise you every thing you'll care for. Your father knows how well I'm fixed, financially. You can live on the ranch, or, if you'd like it better, you can live in a city."

"You're very kind, Mr. Knowlton, and I ought to be grateful, I know; but you said you'd give me plenty of time to think it over, and you haven't given me a week. And—There! I hear father coming, hungry as a wolf as he always is, and supper isn't ready."

Donald Knowlton also heard the crunching footsteps on the gravelly hillside and smothered an oath in his big beard, as Nellie, with undisguised relief, began a hurried preparation for the evening meal.

He was picking up his hat with the thought of going out to meet Conner, when the latter hailed him from the doorway:

"Hello! Hello! Glad to see ye, Gittin' along handsome, I see. Glad you're enjoyin' yourself, I am so!"

He extended his hand to Knowlton, and gave Nellie a questioning glance.

"I was just on the point of walking out," said Knowlton, picking up and fumbling at his hat. "Miss Nellie is commencing to heat up that stove and I've no doubt it'll be cooler outside."

Then he wiped his flaming face with a big,

red handkerchief, and with sudden resolution moved toward the door. Joe was still pulling at his queer-looking pipe, but he knocked the ashes from it and arose when Knowlton appeared.

A moment later Hank Conner joined them, and the trio walked into the grove beyond earshot of the house.

The sun had set, but its light still colored the sky and made surrounding objects easily distinguishable.

"Set down," said Conner, pointing to a log. "Wasn't lookin' for you this evenin', but you're jes' as welcome."

The two white men sat down on the log, but Blackfoot Joe squatted upon the grass before them in true Indian fashion.

"We didn't expect to come this evening," Knowlton declared, again mopping his face. "But Joe came in from Cross-Notch this afternoon, and I took a sudden notion to ride over."

"Nothin' new at Cross-Notch?" addressing the question to the half-breed.

Joe grunted a negative, but did not deign to lift his eyes from the ground.

"Ask an Injun when you want to hear the news! They'll tell ye the hull p'ticklars at the fust jump."

He pushed the hat back from his bandaged head as if the wound were heated and pained him.

"There isn't much to tell," Knowlton averred. "Everything's safe and going on about as usual. If there had been anything out of the common run, some of the boys would have sent a letter."

"Yes, I s'pose so. An' about the gal, Knowlton? She don't seem to take to you. Women air rum critters. She'd rather have a cowboy 'thout a cent than a rich cattleman. Women ain't only rum critters, but they're fools."

"Too much talk, talk!" growled Joe. "Injun no talk so much when 'um want squaw. Squaw not like that way."

Knowlton laughed in his disagreeable fashion. "You may be a philosopher, Joe, about Injun matters, but I can't consider you good authority on a point like this."

"I'm sorry," Conner declared. "But hang it, man, what can I do? She don't fancy ye, that's a fact; though I've counted yer dollars over an' over ag'in before her, an' run t'other feller down fer all I was w'ith. A man don't like to go much furdern that with his own daughter."

There was an underlying meaning in the tone and Knowlton caught it.

"That is, unless the pay is bigger?"

"Edzackly! A heap sight bigger'n ye've put it yit. You're a good ketch, Knowlton. There ain't a better along the Yallerstone. But that don't help me any, unless ye come down han'some with the ducats."

"I thought a bargain was a bargain!" snarled the ranchman.

"So it is; an' I've kerried out my part. I didn't agree to do anything but argy the case. An' if I hain't argied longer an' harder'n any Philadelphia lawyer then I hain't said a word."

"Well, how much do you want for doing the thing up in the right shape?"

"Double the figgers. That, with what I've got at Cross-Notch, 'll jes' about fix me up to suit."

"And what'll you do to earn that amount?"

"I'll put the gal where Gid Dane won't git to see her in a hurry, an' where you can shine around her as much as you like."

"And what if she still refuses?"

"Tain't at all likely. If Dane's kep' away she won't hold out ag'in' ye more'n two or three months at the furdest. I hain't never had much to do with women, but I think I understand 'em. Anyway, I understand Nell."

"The money's yours if the scheme wins," agreed Knowlton.

"It'll win. I ain't at all afeard o' that. Let's see! This is a Chuesday. 'I'll send Joe to Cross-Notch with her nex' Sunday."

"Joe's black eyes sparkled strangely in the semi-gloom."

"Me take 'um," he declared, as if aroused to sudden interest.

"Yes; I knowed you would. An' if I can make it handy I'll send 'em sooner," addressing the last to Knowlton.

"For a plan like that, Cross Notch is the very place," the ranchman assented. "And, as I said, if it works the cash is yours."

Joe was sniffing the air and rubbing his stomach suggestively.

"Now, that the thing's fixed, won't you come an' have some supper? I can see that Joe's as hungry as if he was a giniwine Crow."

Conner got up from the log as he extended the invitation.

"No," Knowlton asserted. "I want to get back to the ranch right away; and Joe must go with me, for there's a little matter I want him to attend to."

The half-breed scowled and followed Knowlton somewhat reluctantly toward the trail. In another moment they were gone; and Hank Conner, his brain filled with wicked scheming, turned slowly toward the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

A COUNTER-STROKE.

CONNER ate his supper in silence and retired early to brood over the plans he had outlined. The next morning he assumed an air of great dejection and sat for a long time on the doorstep moodily smoking his pipe. Nellie could not fail to notice his manner, and questioned him concerning it.

"I'm jes' nigh about troubled to death," he replied. "As I tol' ye t'other night it's been clost rubbin' with me fer a year er more. An' now, Bill Staples has gone into the fur-buyin' bizness."

"I never tol' you about the row I had with Staples last spring. I lowed you'd worry over it an' so kep' it to myself."

Nellie's sympathy was aroused and she drew her chair into the doorway near him.

"You see, it was this way," he continued, pleased by the movement. "There was a deer got in among a bunch of Staples's cattle. I shot at it and killed a steer. Some of the cowboys told Staples what I'd done, an' he was r'arin' mad. Said I was a thief and a vagabone an' accused me of shootin' the steer a-purpose to make beef out o' it. Frum that time to this he hain't give me no peace."

"Las' month, after makin' a good bargain with a Crow Injun, I was blame fool enough to give the red a drink. Staples found it out an' sent word to the rev'nue officers, an' they're comin' fer me hot an' heavy. You know, I s'pose, what it means to sell er give liquor to an Injun. The Gover'ment is dead ag'in' it; though it's done ever' day in these mountains an' nothin' at all thought about it by anybody. If Staples hadn't been mad at me he'd never thought o' reportin' such a thing."

"Knowlton heerd about it an' that's what brought him over las' night. He tol' me about it when we went into the thicket. I tell ye, Nell, Knowlton's the best friend I've got; an' it hurts me to think you can't set any store by him."

"He said the Gover'ment officers would git hyer some time nex' week. P'intedly, it's my opinion—though he didn't seem to dream o' sich a thing—there's one o' them hyer, now."

He gave her a sidelong glance as he made the statement.

"O' course I know you won't believe it, but that identical chap is Gid Dane."

"No, I won't believe it!" with a decided shake of her head.

"I knowed you wouldn't, but it's true, jes' the same. If not, what makes him go snoopin' 'round the country as sly as a weasel huntin' ducks. That hain't cowboy style, Nell, that hain't."

The girl flushed, guiltily. She knew that Gideon was looking for a band of cattle-thieves, but he had warned her not to mention the fact to any one—not even to her father. To the uninitiated he was represented as one of Staples's cowboys. But as Knowlton belonged to the ranchman's league which had employed the cowboy detective, Nellie thought it likely the ranchman had revealed Dane's true character to her father.

"I am certain he isn't what you think him," she declared. "If he goes snoopin' about, as you say, that very fact proves he isn't looking for you. He knows where to find you at any time."

"Yes," Conner confessed, not having a reply ready for this argument. "That sounds reasonable. But I tell ye, Nell, that feller hain't a straight cowboy. I'm not sayin' this to set ye ag'in' him, ner to boost along Knowlton, but because it's true."

"I'm very sorry, father," placing her hand gently on his shoulder. "I know you didn't mean any wrong when you gave the liquor to the Indian. Maybe if you tell the officers just how it was, they'll overlook it."

"That shows ye don't know anything about 'em, Nell. They're a reg'lar set of bloodhounds when they git after a man. No; it wouldn't do to try to explain. I'll jes' cut sticks fore they come."

"An' that brings me to what I want to say to you. Did I ever tell ye anything about Cross-Notch? I guess I never did. Well, it's a purty place, an' ye'd like it. I'm goin' to send ye there

nex' Sunday, with Joe. I'll go ahead an' fix things an' make 'em comfortable.

"At Cross-Notch I can snap my fingers at the rev'nue, and at Bill Staples an' all his cowboys. They'll not find me there in a hurry; an' as fer buyin' furs the chances'll be better there than hyer."

A sudden suspicion came to the girl as she listened.

"Where is this Cross-Notch, father? I never heard you speak of it before."

Conner hesitated and toyed with his pipe.

"Well, it's hard to tell ye edzactly the way. It's across them," pointing with his pipe to the mountain spur. "Ten or fifteen miles, maybe. There's a sort of blind trail leadin' to it. Joe knows the way, so you won't have any trouble on that p'int."

The directions were most indefinite. Nellie said as much, and he went more carefully into details.

"It's a place that can't be got at very easy?"

"Not easy enough for the rev'nue men to follow me. I'm choosin' it fer that, mostly; though, as I said, it'll be a better place fer my bizness than hyer."

"Be sure ye don't fergit the time. Nex' Sunday. You'd better gether up all the little traps ye keer for, an' I'll send er take them over before we go."

He arose as if to indicate that the interview was at an end; and, Nellie, taking the hint, returned to her work.

In a little while Hank Conner went away, as was his daily custom. He looked in at her as he passed the door and was pleased at the quiet manner in which she went about her tasks. But could he have read the thoughts that surged through her brain he would not have been so self-satisfied and content.

He had no idea that she was watching him from the window as he rode away. When he was out of sight a gratified smile overspread her face.

"I think I understand you, father," she whispered, as she hurried to finish her work. "You are teaching me bad tricks. I don't know how many times you have tried to fool me, lately. And you're at it again. You didn't use to do that; or, if you did, I never found it out. It causes me to play at the same game."

A pained look had replaced the smile.

"I'm sorry I can't believe, you as I did once. I'm awfully afraid those stories about the deer, and the liquor, and the revenue officers are just stories. I know the deer story is, for if it wasn't I'd have heard something about it, long ago. That surely was made up since you had that talk with Knowlton."

"I think I see through your little plans. This Cross-Notch is some out-of-the-way place that nobody ever goes to, and where it'll be hard work for Gid to find me. I'll be bound, that's one of Knowlton's schemes. Well, I think I'm as sharp as Knowlton, and I'll see if I can't checkmate him."

When the housework was finished she drew some writing material from a drawer of the home-made bureau and hastily scribbled a note to Dane. In it she detailed her suspicions and described, with minute exactness, the route to Cross-Notch, as it had been given her by her father.

"Now, if he hasn't fooled me on that, too!" reading the letter over when it was finished.

"That's the trouble! I'll have to add a postscript, I guess, saying that it's across the mountains, anyway; and if he can't find that trail he must come by some other!"

She had such faith in Dane that she believed he could find Cross-Notch, no matter in what obscure valley it was located.

When the postscript was written, she folded the letter and, placing it in her pocket, she carefully pinned it there. Then, after some further preparations, she hastened to the log stable.

Conner kept two ponies there, one for himself and one for Nellie. Hers was in its stall, and she proceeded to saddle and bridle it with the same nervous haste. This done, she ascended a slight prominence and satisfied herself that her father had really departed.

She then led the pony out of the stable and rode away down the east trail. When she gained the level land, more than an hour later, she headed the animal toward Staples's Ranch.

Staples looked somewhat astonished when she rode up to the door of the ranch-house and asked for Gideon Dane.

"Blest if I know where he is at this minute," he declared, staring in surprise at her flushed face and then at the panting pony. "He went away yisterday morning on a little bizness trip, an' I lowed he didn't know jes' when he'd git

back. They hain't nothin' the matter over your way, is they?"

"No-o! That is, nothing in particular. I wanted to see him, that's all. I was afraid he mightn't be here, and so wrote this. Give it to him as soon as he comes, please."

She produced the letter and handed it to Staples.

"Yes, certainly; and that 'minds me. There's a letter hyer for you. You kind o' rattled me, I guess, when you rid up. Anyway, I'd 'a' clean fergot it if ye hadn't give me this."

He retreated precipitately after making this statement, but soon reappeared with Gideon's letter.

"Thank you," she said, blushing as she took it and placed it in the pocket where the other had been.

"Sharp as a steel-trap an' purty as a yearlin' heifer!" Staples muttered, gazing after her admiringly as she rode away. "If I was a few years younger an' a dozen times han'somer, hanged if I wouldn't try to cut Gid Dane out."

CHAPTER IX. INDIAN TREACHERY.

DARK thoughts stirred in the brain of the Blackfoot as he strode silently down the trail after Knowlton. The thoughts had been aroused by Conner's statement that he would send Joe as Nellie's escort to Cross-Notch. Beneath the half-breed's stoical demeanor there slumbered a heart of tempest and fire. For a long time he had looked with a favoring eye on the trader's daughter; and circumstances seemed at last bent on placing her in his power.

Knowlton was so accustomed to Joe's silence and reserve that he paid no attention to it; and when they reached their ponies, he mounted and rode on in advance, the Indian following with the quiet submission of a captive.

Joe had a regard for Conner that was mingled with a wholesome fear. None had better opportunities for becoming thoroughly acquainted with the scheming trader. He knew his life-history and the particulars of the thousand dark deeds that stained it. Yet he had never thought of using the power which this knowledge gave him.

He had known Nellie and had seen her frequently almost from the days of her infancy. Only recently, however, had his thoughts taken an amorous turn. All at once, as it seemed to him, the laughing, hoydenish girl had become a beautiful woman.

He had never dared hint his desires to any one, and even strove to repress and banish them from his mind. Now they had leaped bounds, and he gladly gave them free rein and reveled in the fancies which they conjured.

The occasion to put his desires into effect also appeared opportune. Far away to the northward lay the country of the Blackfeet. His mother was there; and he believed he would be gladly welcomed by the tribe, notwithstanding the fact that he had apparently deserted them for the Crows. They were the enemies of the Crows, and by giving them valuable information, and pretending he had gone among the Crows solely for the purpose of obtaining it, he was satisfied he could regain their favor.

There were certain circumstances which would doubtless render it impossible for Conner to attempt any extended search or pursuit. They would at least hold him in check for a time, during which the Blackfoot could make good his escape with the girl. As her escort, the half-breed would not be suspected for two or three days; or if any doubts should arise in Conner's mind they would be temporarily allayed by the thought that Nellie and the half-breed had probably lost their way.

Such were some of the ideas that seethed in the Indian's mind. So occupied with them was he that he forgot the distance traversed or the lapse of time, and was considerably astonished when Knowlton turned into the familiar trail that led to the corral.

"Just turn the ponies in there," ordered the ranchman, dismounting and giving his bridle-rein to Joe. "You'll find some cold grub in the kitchen and you can sleep in the bunk-room."

"What want with me?" Joe asked, referring to the statement which Knowlton had made to Conner.

"Eh? Oh, I just said that because I knew Nellie didn't care to see us again. It's not always best to worry a woman when she shows her dislike so plain. You'll want to go to the village to-morrow, of course, and you can roll out in the morning as soon as you like, without waiting for me."

The half-breed grumbled some unintelligible

sentences as he led the ponies to the corral. Evidently he did not like being played with in that fashion. And, besides, he had lost a warm supper, and that meant much to him. Altogether the circumstances tended to increase the hatred of Knowlton that was growing in his breast.

That night, while surrounded with cowboys in the bunk-house and pretending to be soundly sleeping, he matured a plan which he thought would accomplish his purpose. It was simply to turn Nellie against her father and influence her in his own favor by a combination of true and lying statements.

So taken up was he with the idea, that he mounted his pony before daylight and started for the Conner cabin. The distance was considerable, and when he reached the cabin he found it deserted. He was much puzzled at this, for he had fully expected to find Nellie at home. But he got out of the difficulty, in true Indian fashion, by carefully trailing the girl's pony, which, as he knew, had a split in one hoof.

He had almost reached the plain and was riding slowly along with his head bent forward and his eyes scanning the earth, when he was aroused by a low, gurgling chuckle. He drew himself up quickly, with a firm grasp on the bridle-rein.

A long-barreled rifle was pointed at him over a rock, and behind it was the Mad Hermit, a queer grin on his face.

"There was reds there, too," the latter cried, as he lowered the breech of the rifle. "I didn't know but ye mou't 'a' been one of 'em, an' so thought I'd stop ye an' see."

The Blackfoot had not been at the Crow village when Featherstone visited it, and so had never heard of him. But he perceived at once that there was something wrong with the man's mind, and attempted to conciliate him with a broad smile.

"Me Joe!" he exclaimed. "Me heap good Injun. What 'um great hunter want?"

"Blood!" said Featherstone, in a fierce voice. "His blood! Injuns' blood!" and he tossed the rifle into the hollow of his arm and advanced menacingly.

Joe quaked visibly, for he was inclined to cowardice.

"Whur is he?" stopping short and glowering. "I saw you with him. Let me see! Was it yisterday, or years ago?"

"Never see Injun with anybody!" Joe declared, slowly backing the pony from the apparently dangerous vicinity.

"Yes, I seen you with him. But I can't think when it was."

The Mad Hermit pressed a hand to his head, as if striving to recall some old memory; and Joe, taking advantage of this momentary abstraction, spurred the pony past him and fled wildly down the trail.

He did not once look back till he had reached the plain; and even then, judging by the way he urged the pony on, he was fearful that a ball from the long rifle might reach him.

Suddenly he pulled in. In his fright and haste he had entirely forgotten the business in which he was engaged.

Then he commenced to search for the lost trail; but before he had spent much time at this he saw Nellie Conner riding toward him from the direction of Staples's ranch.

She seemed anxious to avoid him, but he rode in a direction to intercept her.

"Good-morning," she said, with her usual politeness, as they came face to face.

"Glad to see 'um!" Joe answered, with a grin. "Injun been up to cabin. Hank, him gone. Gal, him gone, too."

"So you wanted to see us?"

He bobbed his head in a decided affirmative.

"Joe want to see gal, Nell. Yes. Want to have heap big talk."

"Let us ride on, then," she urged. "You can tell me what you have to say as we go along."

"Say him here!" Joe asserted, glancing apprehensively toward the mountain trail. "Big cattelman Knowlton want Nell fer squaw. Silver-saddle cowboy want Nell fer him squaw. Hank no like cowboy; like Knowlton."

A surprised and questioning look came into the girl's eyes.

"What are you driving at, Joe?"

"Hank say Joe take Nell to Cross-Notch," the half-breed went on, eking out his words with a multiplicity of signs. "Knowlton say so, too. Last night, supper-time."

"Joe want supper, heap bad," sawing his hand across his stomach. "Cattelman say no, an' take Injun away. Injun come back sun-up; an' here."

"Yes, Joe; I know all that. There's something else you want to tell me. What is it?"

"Cross-Notch bad place. Joe not like gal go there. Bad cattleman there. Heap bad man there."

"And you think I ought to stay away?"

"Silver-saddle 'way over there," pointing a brown finger to the northward. "Joe see him yisterday. Him say, Nell come; Joe bring 'um. Joe bring 'um Sunday when Cross-Notch."

The girl's surprise was increasing every moment.

"You mean that Dane sent for me?" looking distrustfully at the half-breed. "And you think I'd better go with you there, Sunday, instead of going to Cross-Notch? Is that it, Joe?"

The pleased Blackfoot nodded.

"And what does he want with me?"

"Him no say!" Joe answered, not quite prepared for the question. "Silver-saddle heap bad hurt. Him at tepee over there. Say Joe bring 'um gal there. Cattleman Knowlton no let Injun tell last night. Take Injun 'way fear him tell. Joe come back tell, sun-up. Joe take 'um gal when Sunday Cross-Notch. No can take 'um sooner."

The disjointed sentences were hurled from his lips like solid shot from a siege-gun.

"Are you telling me the truth, Joe?" she demanded, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"White gal him same as brother!" he asserted, solemnly. "Injun no speak crooked to him brother."

The half-breed could not help revealing his personal interest, while making this assertion.

"You are lying to me, Joe!" she declared, with stinging directness. "I can see it in your face. No, I won't go with you into the mountains; and I won't go with you to Cross-Notch!"

She drew the pony sharply to one side, as she made this declaration, so that the half-breed could not grasp the bridle rein if such were his intentions; and, giving the animal a sharp cut, dashed with all speed from the spot.

A look of terrible rage overspread the Blackfoot's face.

"Squaw him fool!" he growled, shaking his clinched hand at the flying girl. "'Um see Injun Joe bimeby."

CHAPTER X. CROW MEDICINE.

"Now, I wonder how much of his story I can safely believe?"

Cowboy Gid looked after the vanishing hermit in a puzzled, mystified way.

"How much of that is truth, and how much of it originated in his crazy brain? It sounds mighty like the imaginings of a lunatic. The rock gateway, the mysterious smoke, the enchanted valley! I'm sure I never heard of any of them before."

He stared up and down the trail and into the alkali sink, as if to assure himself he was not dreaming. Then, slowly and thoughtfully, he began to retrace his way, moving up the canyon in the direction pointed out by Featherstone.

As his nerves became quiet he began to feel the pangs of hunger, and the weariness resulting from his recent tremendous exertions. His canteen of water and a small quantity of food had been attached to the saddle, and he now had them with him. So he sought a sheltered nook at the side of the trail and proceeded to satisfy his cravings.

He fully intended to go on when this had been done, but he was so weighted by a sense of languor that he decided to rest awhile. The result was that he fell asleep and slept for hours. When he woke the stars were shining.

"Great Scott!" the Range Detective exclaimed, starting to his feet. "This is a fine lay-out for a chap in my business. I wonder what time it is?"

He drew a match from a metallic case, scratched it and looked at his watch.

"Close on to midnight! And I can't do a thing till morning. I might move along the trail, but the chances are about ten to one I'd slip into some hole or other."

He took a seat on a rock and watched the stars to pass away the time, hoping he could see better as he became accustomed to the darkness, and could proceed on his way. But, though the gloom lifted somewhat, it did not become sufficiently light to permit traveling with any degree of safety.

"Stuck for all night!" he groaned. "Just my luck. Well, I might as well make the best of it. I'm as sore and stiff as a work-horse, and this forced rest may be the best thing that could happen me, after all."

With this philosophic reflection he returned to his stony couch and again drifted into slumber.

The next morning he finished his canteen of water, considerably diminished his supply of

food, and much strengthened and refreshed, continued his tramp along the ledge.

The way became very broken and difficult, after a time, and he wondered much how a pony ever managed to get over it at all. He was not sure that any pony had ever gone that way, but such had been his theory, and he was disinclined to abandon it.

Finally the ledge dipped downward and ended in the canyon. This made walking easier. There were holes at intervals. One of these contained water, and from it he refilled his canteen.

He lost much time in following deceptive side-passages; but, just before noon, he came to what he felt sure was the rocky gateway mentioned by the Mad Hermit. Here the canyon ended in a sandy plateau. To the left frowned the precipitous mountain-slopes. To the right, a well-defined trail wound away in what he believed to be the direction of the Indian village. In front, and two or three hundred yards distant, was the gateway of rock. The little plateau ended there in a wall of granite. But there was an opening through it, and the passage followed a line as straight as if it had been hewn by the hand of man. The sides of this singular hallway arose perpendicularly, and at its further end he could see the blue of the sky.

"Yes, I'm sure that's it," mused Gid. "Featherstone's story must have been true, after all. Now for the mysterious valley, the impassable canyon and all the rest of it. I suppose they're beyond the gateway, if they're at all. Straight ahead. Yes, that's what he said, straight ahead."

In a few minutes he was within the hall-way. For some distance the floor was sandy, like the plateau. Further along the sand disappeared, and the way became rough and choked with boulders.

Dane clambered around and over these, keeping his eye fixed on the bit of blue sky ahead. This was united to the sunshine above him by what seemed a broad, blue band.

A half-hour's laborious work carried him through the gateway. It ended in another plateau. This plateau was rocky instead of sandy, and across its center yawned a deep chasm.

This chasm was not wide, as the cowboy discovered when he came up to it. But it was far too wide to be leaped, and its walls were far too steep and smooth for any one to climb up or down them. There seemed absolutely no way of crossing it, and it extended on either hand beyond the reach of the cowboy's vision.

The plateau seemed the termination of that spur of the mountain range, for beyond it the stony slopes dipped away into a valley that appeared to be limitless in extent.

"The old chap is right side up again!" Dane exclaimed, with a sort of grim satisfaction. "Maybe I'm wrong in calling him crazy. This is surely his 'canyon that no man can cross.' And if that isn't an enchanted valley, it at least looks pretty enough to be one."

"Hullo! There's the smoke, too, as I'm a living man! That rascally medicine-man is doubtless feeding his fire again. If he gets across here, I don't see why other people can't."

A thin, vapory column lifted itself from behind a fringe of trees, a mile or more away.

Believing the medicine-man was somewhere near that ascending column, Dane came to the natural conclusion that he must have crossed the chasm at a point not far distant. And where the medicine-man had crossed he could cross. So he began a hurried but careful search for this place.

There was pinnacle-like rocks and giant boulders along the chasm edge, but these did not much impede his movements; and he quickly extended his search a considerable distance in either direction. But it was barren of results. There was no point at which it seemed even a deer could leap across.

"He continued the search throughout the afternoon; and it was night when he returned to the rock gateway, tired, dejected, and in no very good humor with himself.

"Confound it!" the Cowboy Detective muttered, as he tried to compose himself for sleep. "I didn't expect all the hermit's statements to prove true. But that certainly seems a chasm that no man can cross. How the medicine-man gets over it, if he ever does, is a puzzler. If it wasn't for the smoke I'd think it never had been crossed by any one."

For a long time he tossed and fretted, but finally fell asleep. He was aroused in the early hours of the morning by a most singular medley of sounds. The noises appeared to come from the other end of the rock gateway

"What's broke loose, now?"

He sat bolt upright and instinctively drew his revolver.

There was a low, monotonous drumming, mingled with shrieks and cries and a Babel of animal and bird calls. Occasionally a wild and piercing yell arose above the confusion.

The cowboy had not the faintest idea of what it meant.

"That beats my time!" he muttered, scrambling to his feet. "Sounds like all the birds and beasts in creation were having a concert. I'll have to look into it."

He cautiously advanced through the almost impenetrable gloom of the tunnel-like place. In spite of his precautions he stumbled occasionally over the boulders, to the great detriment of his temper and his shins. The way became comparatively easy, however, when he reached the sand.

The sounds were becoming louder and plainer, but they were as mystifying as at first.

As he advanced he thought he could distinguish human voices. The yells that continued to rise certainly came from the throats of savages; and that monotonous, doleful drumming was as certainly made by savage hands. The light of a fire penetrated the passage, and dark shadows flitted fantastically across it.

This quickened his curiosity and hastened his speed, and he soon reached a point where he could see what was occurring. Such a scene he had never beheld. A small fire was flickering on the edge of the sandy plateau, sufficient to light up the place in a ghostly, uncertain way. In the center of the plateau lay a stalwart and almost naked Indian, and around him circled and howled at least a score of paint-bedaubed Crows.

They were led by a gaudily-attired individual whom Dane guessed to be the medicine-man of the tribe. He was dressed even more fantastically than his followers; there was a more liberal smearing of vermilion and ochre; a greater array of feathers, beads, bear-claws and porcupine-quills.

His movements were ungraceful and jerky, a sort of chant issued from his lips, and from time to time he waved a medicine-bag toward the man on the ground. The others imitated his example, but they varied the chant with yells and screeches, and imitations of the notes of birds and the cries of animals.

Outside of this whirling circle was another circle of seated figures. These added to the din by beating rapidly, and without regard to time, on rudely-fashioned drums.

For a time Dane stared, not knowing what it meant. Then it dawned on him that the man lying on the ground was sick; and that the Crows, believing him to be possessed of a demon or evil spirit, were endeavoring to exorcise it, with the aid of their medicine-man.

"All that racket's enough to kill a well man!" he thought, as he looked and wondered. "I'd about as soon have real demons around me as those fellows. Any sensible demon, if he should meet one of them, would take to the woods and stay there forever."

The gray dawn was fast breaking above the eastern hills, and Dane saw that the incantations of the medicine-man were about to end. The howlers had howled themselves hoarse, and the drummers had drummed the strength out of their arms.

Suddenly the medicine-man elevated his totem-bag above his head, gave a shout, and the dancing ceased. Then the sick man was picked up by his friends and borne up the trail toward the Crow village. The other Crows followed in solemn procession. All but the medicine-man. He remained behind as if he had other work to perform.

When the procession was out of sight he turned into the rock gateway and hurried by Dane, passing so near that the latter could have touched him with his hand.

"Now for the impassable canyon and the mysterious smoke!" the cowboy muttered, as he followed after.

CHAPTER XI. ENTRAPPED.

ALTHOUGH the light was breaking along the sky overhead, it was still very dark in the rocky passage. The medicine-man seemed not to mind this, however, and hurried on as if the way were perfectly familiar to him. So rapidly did he move that it required the utmost exertion on Dane's part to keep up with him, and at the same time avoid the pitfalls and boulders that made difficult the route.

"A regular steam-engine!" the cowboy growled, as he slipped and stumbled along in the medicine-man's wake. "If he don't hear me I shall certainly think he's deaf. Should think he would be, after the noise of that performance."

At this rate of progress it did not take them long to reach the further end of the passage. Here the medicine-man stepped boldly out on the plateau. The increasing light outlined him distinctly. Dane feared to follow, because of this, and watched his movements from the shelter of the rocks.

"Now, we'll see what we'll see! The fellow hasn't any wings, that's certain, and if he can get across that chasm I ought to be able to do the same."

"Hullo!" He ain't surely going to try to jump from the top of that rock?"

The medicine-man had advanced to a peculiarly shaped rock that in a measure overhung the chasm, and seemed on the point of clambering to its apex.

"By the great Sam Patch, what a jump that would be! If he does it, he ought to try Niagara, and make his fortune."

Dane was so excited that he almost forgot his customary prudence and caution.

Slowly and carefully the medicine-man clambered toward the top of the rock, creeping along on his hands and knees as he approached the summit. Then, to Dane's intense surprise, the rock began to tip with a slow and gradual movement.

It tipped more and more, as the medicine-man crawled on, and finally dipped gracefully and with a rocking motion until the apex rested on the opposite bank of the canyon. Thus it formed a bridge, from which the Indian leaped lightly to the earth. When his weight had been removed from it, the top reascended, with the same slow motion until it occupied its old position.

"Well, that just knocks everything I ever heard of!" the cowboy declared, staring open-mouthed at the mysterious stone.

The medicine-man had disappeared among the low-growing bushes. Dane scarcely knew whether to follow him or not, but finally ventured out of his hiding-place and decided to attempt it.

"Here goes, anyway!" looking to see that his revolver and lasso were all right. "I'd feel a good deal easier, though, if I knew just how we're to get back. One thing's certain, the rock can't be reached from that side! I reckon, though, the old howler knows his business, and has a way of getting back that's just as easy as his way of getting over. He's evidently made the trip before, and I flatter myself I can go wherever he can."

With these reflections, the cowboy hastened to the base of the rock, anxious to cross before the medicine-man had gone so far that it would be difficult to follow him. His curiosity would not allow him to pass on, however, without first giving the rock a careful inspection.

It was of the type known as a rocking stone, of which several have been found in various parts of the world. Nature apparently in an odd freak, had so balanced it in its rounded and rocky bed that any slight weight was all that was necessary to destroy its equilibrium and set it to oscillating in a remarkable way. A greater weight threw the center of gravity outside the base and careened the top. As it was poised over the chasm and inclined in a manner across it, it of course dipped toward the opposite side; and as the weight was increased, as would be the case when the body of a man approached the apex, the center of gravity was thrown further than ever from the base, and the stone, with an easy, gliding motion, fell across the chasm. When the weight was removed it resumed its upright position.

Dane, who was a fairly well-read man, had some knowledge of the properties of a rocking stone, and so was quick to understand and appreciate the qualities of this one.

But he had no time for an extended examination or study of it; and clambered up its sides, as he had seen the medicine-man do. It descended with his weight, and he soon stood on the further side of the chasm. He could not be sure that the Indian had not seen him while he was on top of the rock, but he was compelled to trust that to the good fortune which generally attended him. It seemed quite probable, however, that he had not been seen, for the medicine-man had gone straight on; and having no suspicion that he was being followed, would not be likely to keep any close watch in his rear.

Having gained the opposite side, the cowboy hurried away in the direction taken by the red-

skin. The gray dawn had changed into the flush of early sunrise; and, as Dane looked toward the fringe of trees where he had seen the mysterious smoke on the day previous, he was surprised to see it still ascending. He was puzzled to account for this, knowing that the medicine-man could not have had time to reach the trees and kindle the fire.

"Right again, old hermit!" he thought, as he moved swiftly, but cautiously, forward. "I'll be forced to the conclusion, pretty soon, that your head-piece is a better one than mine, and that you ain't half as crazy as you act. You called this the enchanted valley; and that is what it is. A smoke coming from a fire that don't need anything to keep it going! It's equal to the rocking stone."

As the light increased he advanced with more care than ever. He believed he was on the eve of great and important discoveries and it would never do to jeopardize them by heedlessness. He had not seen the medicine-man, however, since the latter had disappeared in the bushes. It was important that he should keep pace with him, and, believing the Indian had made straight for the towering smoke, Dane set out for that point without stopping to search for a trail.

A walk of a half-hour brought him to the trees. Through these he made his way, in the same cautious manner, and soon stood at their further edge.

Here he was greeted with a surprise fully as great as any he had experienced on that eventful morning. The ascending column was not composed of smoke at all, but of steamy vapor. This vapor arose from a small mud geyser. The geyser was bowl-shaped, and in its center seethed and bubbled a mass of liquid mud that gave off offensive odors, and was apparently highly heated.

The medicine-man was standing near the geyser, and was tossing into it masses of earth and hardened mud. These quickly choked up the geyser's throat, stopping the bubbling and hissing and preventing the ascent of vapor.

When this had been accomplished the medicine-man retired a short distance, as if to watch the effect. He had scarcely done so when the choking substances were hurled high into the air, with a dull rumbling report, and the vapor rolled upward in dense and sulphurous folds.

"That's some more of his hocus-pocus!" Dane asserted, as he crouched and stared wonderingly. "A finale to the conjuring performance, likely. He's a long-headed chap, if he is a Crow. The fellows at the village will see this, and it will greatly add to the scamp's reputation as a big medicine."

The wily rascal did not seem to be through with his performance yet, for he again approached the seething geyser. This time he produced a totem-bag of dressed deerskin, curiously striped and ornamented. Into it he thrust some of the odorous geyser mud and a few pebbles, and then carefully sewed it up.

"I reckon that's a charm to help out in the cure of the sick man. I've heard of the like. But I always understood that the totem-bags were filled with snakes' teeth and other truck like that. But it only goes to show that there's one medicine-man at least awake in his own interest. Snakes' teeth are hard to get, sometimes, and mud and stones will do just as well, if one only thinks so."

"There he goes, on the back track, and I must follow him if I expect to get out of here as easy as I got in."

The medicine-man was moving toward the mountain, but this time at a more leisurely pace, and the cowboy had little difficulty in keeping him in sight.

The sun had risen by this time, and its rays drove the shadows from the valley and tipped the peaks with fire.

When the medicine-man reached the chasm, Dane was creeping through the bushes only a few feet behind him, half-fearful that the Indian would vanish and leave him ignorant of the means used in recrossing.

The medicine-man halted opposite the rocking stone, and gave a low whistle. In answer to it, Blackfoot Joe hurried out of the rock gateway. He had evidently been awaiting this signal, for, when he reached the stone, he clambered up it without hesitation or a word of instruction.

"So, Joe is the old chap's ally!" thought Dane, his astonishment passing all bounds. "What next, I wonder?"

The stone was dipping and rocking under Joe's weight, and as he neared the top it again descended and bridged the chasm. Then the medicine-man leaped upon it; and, as the two scrambled feet foremost toward the other side,

it swung as if on a pivot and once more lifted its head in air.

"Trapped!" gritted the cowboy, his astonishment changing into something like fear, as they leaped down and hastened toward the dark passage. "That puts me in a bad fix, sure; for I don't believe I can ever cross that chasm without help."

CHAPTER XII.

"HE LIVES THERE!"

NELLIE CONNER was much frightened at the words of the Blackfoot. She had never liked him, but this was the first time he had given her cause for fear.

"No, I won't go with him to Cross-Notch, or anywhere else!" she repeated, as she urged the pony on, looking back now and then to see if Joe was following. "And I shall tell father that he isn't to come on the place again. Of course he was lying, for I'm sure Gid didn't go in that direction."

Here she remembered the letter and, checking the speed of the pony, she took it from her pocket and read it.

"Just as I thought!" she declared, a flush suffusing her cheeks. "He didn't go that way at all. That Blackfoot's a treacherous dog, and I'll never speak to him again."

She tucked the letter again into her pocket; and, as she rode slowly on, her courage came back. Her life in the wilderness had taught her fearlessness and self-reliance. She was as skilled in the use of the rifle and revolver as Hank Conner himself, and could ride a half-wild pony with the grace and ease of a cowboy. Hence she felt fully competent to take care of and defend herself, should occasion arise.

She had now reached the beginning of the mountain trail, and the pony trotted briskly along the screened and shadowy defile. Suddenly there sounded the whirr of a rattlesnake beneath its feet, and it shot forward like a sped arrow. Nellie, who had dropped the rein on its neck and was lost in thought, was hurled heavily to the ground, striking with a force that produced unconsciousness.

When she recovered, a few moments later, and looked about in a dazed way, she was greeted by a strange sight. The Mad Hermit was pulverizing the head of the snake beneath his moccasined heel.

Nellie had never seen him before, but recognized him from Dane's description; and, having an instinctive fear of crazy people, she drew back in a startled way and attempted to rise.

The movement attracted Featherstone's attention. He immediately removed his heel from the squirming mass, came toward her, and bowed, with unexpected politeness.

"Not bad hurt, eh?" was the queer chuckle. "I's most afraid you was. But I killed him."

He waved his hand toward the rattlesnake.

Nellie hastened to assure him that she was not injured in the least.

"Young bones don't break easy," he declared, after an awkward pause. "I know that'd jes' 'a' cracked my head open, fer it splits once in a while, anyway. You live 'round hyer, some-eres, I 'low? Too bad yer hoss went off that way."

"Oh, I can walk," she asserted, steadying herself against a rock as she climbed to her feet. "I live just up there, about a mile."

A strange expression came to Featherstone's face, as he followed the direction of her pointing finger. Nellie noticed it, and wondered at it.

"I've jes' been up that way. Wasn't nobody to home, though."

"No; father's gone to the Crow village and I've been over to the Bitter Creek Ranch."

"H-hm! Pity we can't ketch yer hoss. You 'll haf to hoof it; an' I 'xpect I'd better go 'long with ye, fer ye don't seem over an' above steady on yer feet."

The girl did not greatly relish the idea of his companionship, but there was such evident kindness and sincerity in his voice and eyes that she could not reject the offer. There was nothing of the madman in his appearance or actions.

"If you please," accepting the extended arm with a boldness that surprised even herself. "No doubt I'll have a big hunt for Jeff. He's an ungallant rascal or he wouldn't have deserted me that way."

"So he is. So he is." And the hermit indulged in another of his curious chuckles. "He's a scamp of the first water. I'd trade 'im off fer an Injun cayuse, if he plays them tricks very often."

"Oh, I don't know that Jeff is to blame!" she laughed. "The rattler scared him. He's generally as gentle as a dog. I do hope he wasn't bit."

They were moving slowly up the trail, now; and as she rattled on in her girlish way, the Mad Hermit looked at her closely and questioningly.

"Ye don't talk 'xactly like most of the other folks out hyer. More p'ticklar in your way of speakin'. Don't jes' roll yer words out anyhow and ever'how, like t'others."

The tones evinced a questioning curiosity.

"Do you think so?" queried Nellie, flattered by the compliment. "It's a wonder to me that I talk so any one can understand, for I hear almost as much of Crow and Blackfoot as of English. I haven't had much chance, but I've tried to make the most of it. Father taught me to read; and two years ago, he left me with a family in Virginia City, while he made a long trip to the North and to the States. I don't know just where he did go, but he was away nearly a year. When he came back we moved here."

"A band of Crows had come from further up the country and pitched their village over yonder, and he wanted to be near them to trade."

"The people in Virginia City were very good to me and taught me almost all I know, as far as education goes. They had plenty of books; and when I came away they gave me all I could bring with me. I have kept up my studies since, and have made a great effort to put into practice what I learned while with them. I didn't learn a great deal, but it doesn't take much to make a showing out here."

Featherstone had been listening intently and almost reverently.

"Ye are a smart girl," he declared, bobbing his head impressively. "Don't 'low I ever see a smarter. Yer pap ought to be proud of ye."

The girl smiled. She was beginning to feel perfectly at ease in the company of this queer individual.

"Perhaps he is. I think he sets more store, though, by a good meal. You see I can cook, too, Mr.—"

"Featherstone! Ah, I didn't tell you my name. It's Joel Featherstone; and an odd dog Joel is. I don't live anywhur. The ground, the air, the water are all the same to me. I walk, generally. But, sometimes I can fly an' swim."

They had reached a point from which the cabin was visible, and an air of wildness settled upon him as he looked toward it. His talk, which had been so rational, verged on the incoherent.

Nellie's hand trembled on his arm as she noticed this.

"Yes, I'm a bird sometimes, and sometimes a fish. When I meet him I'll be a snake."

He abruptly withdrew his arm; and Nellie, looking up, saw that his nostrils were dilating and his form quivering with suppressed excitement.

Her involuntary cry of alarm served to quiet him and bring him back to things present.

"You needn't be afeard o' me, little one," he assured her, drawing a deep breath as if to still his trembling nerves. "I wouldn't hurt a hair o' your purty head fer the worl'. But, when I meet him, as I shall some day! Ah-h!"

He forced out his breath with a rasping sound, and wheeled as if to go.

"Yes, I shall meet him, an' the time is not far away. He can't escape me; and you may tell him so, my dear, for he lives there!"

With this, he swung his long rifle, leaped into the bushes and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE BRINK OF THE GEYSER.

NELLIE was greatly startled by this sudden change in the hermit's demeanor, and his desertion of her came as a relief. His strange statement had also frightened her. What did he mean by it?

"He has got some wild idea in his head," she thought, as she hastened up the path toward the cabin. "I wonder if he has any clear notion of what it is himself?"

Over and over she repeated the final words of the hermit, endeavoring to discover their hidden meaning. As she did so her fears increased. She knew that maniacs are subject to sudden and dangerous hallucinations, in which, without cause, they turn against their nearest and best friends and regard them as deadly enemies.

No doubt, in the present instance, the sight of the cabin nestling in the gorge had been sufficiently exciting to disturb the balance of Featherstone's diseased mind, and plant in it murderous thoughts against Connor.

"Oh, dear—I'm afraid there'll be trouble

come of this. He can't have any real enmity against father, but if he thinks he has it will amount to the same thing. It scares me when I think how carelessly I walked along with him. He might have taken it into his head to brain me with that long rifle."

When she reached home she climbed to the top of the ridge back of the house and surveyed both trails as far as she could see. No one was to be seen on either. The hermit had completely vanished, and although she looked long and earnestly up the trail toward the Crow village, she had no real expectation that her father would be returning.

"He won't be home till night, and there's no way to get him word before he comes. If that mad fellow should meet him I don't know what mightn't happen."

Her features became drawn as a sudden recollection chilled her.

"Yes, it must have been him! I'm sure father never really knew who it was that shot him. He tried to make me think it was Gid, but he didn't believe that, or he wouldn't have dropped the subject like he did. That was a yarn made up for the purpose of helping Knowlton."

"Featherstone was no doubt lying in the bushes when father came down the trail, and the notion suddenly came into his head that this was an enemy he ought to put out of the way. And so he shot him. Yes, I'm sure that was the way of it."

She was greatly troubled as she descended from the ridge and entered the cabin. Here her thoughts tended toward melancholy, and, as a relief, she decided to go in search of the pony.

Most of the afternoon was spent in this search, but the pony could not be found, and when she returned, she was exhausted and faint from fatigue and hunger.

Contrary to her expectations Connor did not come home that night. She would have thought little of this, ordinarily. He was frequently absent for days together—days which she improved by study and reading—but this unexpected detention, combined with the hermit's threat, brought her much dread and uneasiness.

The next morning she found Jeff at the door of the stable, eager to get in.

"You rascal, you!" she cried, patting his neck affectionately. "You've broken your bridle-rein, and worried me half to death. I was afraid you'd been struck by a rattler."

She led him into the stable, removed the saddle and bridle, and fed him liberally. Then she climbed the ridge again, and took another survey of the trails.

Along in the afternoon she mounted the pony and rode for some distance up the trail leading to the Crow village. At every bend she half expected to come upon the lifeless body of her father. She would have continued on into the village, but she knew her father would be offended at her for so doing. He had always told her the Crows were a bad lot and she must keep away from them. And besides, should she visit the village she would be forced to return home in the night.

On this trip, and the one she had made in search of the pony, she carried her little rifle, not knowing but she might be called on at any moment to defend herself against Featherstone or Blackfoot Joe.

She had feared Joe would return to the cabin and annoy her with a repetition of his lying stories.

Connor still remaining away, she resolved, the next morning, to make a second visit to the Bitter Creek Ranch. There might be a letter for her from Dane, if he had not returned; or Staples might know something concerning the whereabouts of her father.

"I hate to do it," she thought, flushing slightly. "But I'm certainly justified. I'll surely go crazy if I stay here this way."

She took her little rifle with her, as had become her custom, but she saw neither the hermit nor the half-breed; and the journey to and from the ranch was wholly devoid of exciting incident. No word had been received from Dane since his departure, and Staples could tell her nothing of her father.

That evening Hank Conner returned. In reply to her questions he said he had been at Cross-Notch getting things in readiness for the removal there, and had been unavoidably detained. Then, while he smoked his pipe, and she prepared supper, she told him of her talk with Blackfoot Joe and of the queer statement made by Featherstone.

The half-breed's treachery evidently irritated him.

"He's a lyin' scoundrel!" he snarled. "There

ain't a word o' truth in anything he said. I can't see fer the worl' what he's drivin' at. He knows better, though, than to cross my path."

Then, after a moment's thought:

"He must 'a' been drunk. Likely he got some liquor from the cowboys up at Knowlton's. Why, Nell, that Injun wouldn't dare to chip in where my intrusts are concerned. He knows me too well fer that—a long sight too well; and though I can't tell ye jes' how, his intrusts air my intrusts."

He was proceeding to give other reasons why the Blackfoot would not venture to work against him, when Nellie interrupted with the story of the Mad Hermit.

As he listened to her his pipe dropped from his parted lips and a scared look came into his eyes.

"What sort of a lookin' feller was he, Nell?" he questioned, in a shaky voice.

The girl described Featherstone's appearance as minutely as she could.

"Why, you ain't afraid of him, are you, father?" as she noticed the ashen pallor of his face.

He attempted to laugh, as he picked the pipe from the floor.

"N-no! Can't say that I am. But from all accounts this Featherstone's wuss'n a blind rattler. Ye can't never tell when he's goin' to strike er where he's goin' to strike. If he's tuck a notion ag'in' me he'll be apt to reach fer me sooner er later."

He was slowly recovering his equanimity.

"He may go off an' never bother me at all, but I don't think it's good jedgment to risk it. I've already made arrangements to send ye to Cross-Notch, Sunday. Ye say ye won't go with Joe; an' if we start in the mornin' that'll only make it a day sooner."

"I ain't a mite afeard but what ye'd be jes' as safe with Joe as with me, but when a woman's set she's set. An' besides, I'll feel better away from hyer; fer, sence you've tol' me 'bout him, I'm 'most sure it was Featherstone give me this."

He tapped the half-healed wound on his head.

"And you told me, father, that Gid did it!"

Nellie exclaimed, in a reproachful voice.

Hank Conner was disconcerted only for a moment.

"I thought so, then," he brazenly asserted. "I didn't git a good look at him, ye know, an' I was dead shore it was Dane. But I know, now, it wasn't. 'Twas this other chap; an' he'll lay fer me ag'in, in the same way."

The fears engendered by her story of the Mad Hermit so preyed on him that he had no appetite for the excellent supper she placed before him.

"We'll start bright and early," he said, shoving back his chair after a pretense of eating. "Git together what things we can carry; then that ye'll need most. It's a rough trail we've got to foller, an' we'll have to leave the ponies till another time."

Then he retreated to his bedroom to think over this last startling revelation at his leisure.

He awoke Nellie long before day and announced that it was time to begin the journey. After a hasty breakfast had been prepared and eaten, he brought the bridles and saddles from the stable and placed them, with other valuable articles, in the cabin.

"I've turned the ponies loose," he explained. "We'll have to take a short cut acrost the mountains. I'll come back, after we git settled, an' fetch 'em by another way. Nothin'll hurt 'em hyer, an' they'll git along fu'st rate, for there's plenty o' grass an' water."

He picked up the largest of the two bundles, gave the other to Nellie, and securely locked the house as they left it. Then he added to his burden by taking an ax, and led the way up the Crow village trail.

They were two miles from the cabin when day broke, but Conner still held on his way at the same quick gait until Nellie declared she must stop and rest. The entire forenoon was spent in making a wide detour around the Crow village, to the northward. Many rests were indulged in, yet, notwithstanding this, Nellie was thoroughly tired out when they again turned west and south and reached the apparently impassable chasm.

On its edge they halted for their noonday lunch. They were a mile or two north of the Crow village, and at a point that was wild and grand beyond description. An immense peak towered near them, and the country all about was of the most broken and rugged character. As Nellie looked it over, she wondered how they had ever managed to reach the place at all. In truth she could not have done so had not Conner

assisted and almost carried her in many instances.

"There surely can't be a wilder place in these mountains," she thought, a chill of apprehension striking through her. "I'm afraid Gid can never follow us. It don't look as if a human being had ever been here before. Father has reasons for choosing this route that he keeps from me. I've thought all the time it was because of Gid. Maybe there's something more than that."

When Conner had satisfied his hunger and rested awhile, he picked up the ax and approached a tall tree that was growing in a cleft of rock near the chasm. It was the only tall tree along the mountain slope.

He attacked it with the ax, and after fifteen minutes' brisk work, felled it across the chasm in such a way as to form a bridge.

"Come!" he said, picking up his bundle. "We can cross now. I happened to know of this tree. If it hadn't been hyer, we'd 'a' had nigh about a week's walk to git into the valley over there. I went 'round on a hoss before, an' you know how long it took me to git back."

The tree was a strong one, yet it seemed a dizzy bridge on which to cross, and Nellie almost shuddered as she looked at it.

"I'll help ye," Conner assured, taking her by the hand. "Stick to me, an' ye can't fall if ye want to."

Nellie half-closed her eyes and clung to him during the giddy passage.

When they were over, Conner looked at the bridge as if tempted to cut it away. But he evidently decided not to, and descended into the valley with Nellie at his heels.

Two hours later they came in sight of the grove of trees with the column of vapor rising behind them; and a further walk of half an hour took them through the grove.

When they reached the brink of the mud geyser, Conner threw down his burdens and declared that he intended to rest. Nellie followed his example, for she was almost exhausted and glad of a little respite.

The geyser greatly excited her curiosity and she plied her father with innumerable questions concerning it and the valley which they had entered. While they were thus talking a wild cry came from the grove behind them; and, almost in a moment the Mad Hermit rushed forth and precipitated himself upon Conner.

A terrific struggle followed. Conner fought like a lion at bay; but, as neither had any weapons in his hands it became a contest of brawn and muscle. Featherstone seemed unusually strong for a man of his years, but Conner, by a deft movement, threw him.

Nellie, as soon as the fighting commenced, ran down the valley, screaming hysterically for help. Then, realizing that none could come, she turned and stared spellbound at the struggling men.

As she did so, Conner lifted the Mad Hermit above his head, and seemed on the point of hurling him into the steaming geyser.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT BAY.

GIDEON DANE stared helplessly at the medicine-man and Blackfoot Joe, as they disappeared in the rock passage.

"I never was caught slicker. I wanted to get into the valley; and now that I'm in it I want to get out and can't. The question is, what's to be done?"

He rubbed his nose reflectively and again stared at the tunnel-like gateway.

"That old rascal will not be likely to come back till the Crows have another hoodoo, and there's no telling when that will be. I might lay for him and jump onto the rock when he crosses again. But, hang it! there ain't anything along the chasm big enough to hide a gopher. If I tried to reach him from here, he'd tip the rock back and I'd be worse off than ever."

There was indeed little satisfaction to be extracted from any view of the situation. Had it not been for these thoughts of how he was to regain the mountains, he would have proceeded at once to an exploration of the valley and been glad of the opportunity of so doing. He had started out to search for the valley that was said to lie beyond the Crow village; and now the pleasure of finding it had been changed to apprehension.

"Well, there's no use stewing over it," was his philosophical reflection. "Here I am, and I've got to make the most of it. There's bound to be another way out of this place, and I'll find it if it takes a month. The Yellowstone points up this way, and probably penetrates the valley somewhere. If I find it I can follow it till it takes

me out. It's strange the ranchmen and cowboys don't know any more about this country than they do. They are satisfied with their grasslands, and never seem to think of looking any further."

He crawled out of the bushes, climbed to the top of an adjacent ridge and looked carefully over the country and along the black line of the chasm. He was rewarded by no new discovery, and descended in a rather dejected mood.

"Oh, ho! I wonder what Nell's doing. I've no doubt she'd be worried if she knew what kind of a box I've got into. I hope I'll get out before she has had any cause to get uneasy."

Then he began to retrace his way, slowly and thoughtfully, toward the mud geyser. He was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger. He had emptied his canteen the night before, and now, on examining his pockets, he found only a few fragments of food remaining. These he ate as he walked on; at the same time keeping a sharp lookout for a pool or spring.

Some distance below the geyser he found a hole where a brackish overflow had collected and cooled. The stuff was not very palatable, but he drank a quantity of it and filled his canteen.

"Now, if I only had some eatables to take the taste out of my mouth, I'd feel like a new man. But I haven't, so what's the use?"

He threw himself down on the grass and endeavored to outline some course of procedure. While lying there a rabbit hopped out of the bushes, not far away, and lifted itself inquisitively on its hind feet.

"Surveying the landscape o'er," muttered Dane, as he watched it. "Rabbit steak wouldn't go bad, now."

He cautiously drew and cocked his revolver.

"If I only dared I could tumble that fellow over as nice as you please. But that confounded medicine-man might hear me and take it into his head to make trouble. No doubt he thinks he owns this place. But, pshaw! let him make. I don't know that I ought to be afraid of him."

The rabbit had dropped to its fore feet and seemed on the point of moving away. The temptation was too great to be resisted. Dane bowled it over with a well-directed shot; and the next instant it was kicking in his hand and he was on his way back to the geyser.

Here he dressed it, and roasted it to a turn over wood collected from the grove. He believed the shot had not been heard and trusted to the steam of the geyser to conceal the smoke of the fire.

He had no salt, but his hunger made the rabbit extremely appetizing. When he had finished it he carefully gathered up and concealed the charred sticks; and then pushed on into the unknown and expanding valley before him.

As he advanced it seemed to widen and stretch away illimitably. Although he did not know it, he was on the confines of that wonderful region now known as the Yellowstone Park.

"Looks as if it meant to take in all creation, hereabouts!" he exclaimed, as he plodded on. "There are dozens of ways of getting into and out of this place, if a fellow only knew where to find them. It's foolish to think the rock gateway is the only path leading to it. The medicine-man may think so, and may make the Crows believe so; but I know better."

He soon began to come on an abundance of game animals. They were comparatively tame, too, as if they had not been hunted a great deal. About noon he managed to approach and shoot a black-tailed fawn, and thus secured a supply of meat sufficient for a long tramp.

The valley was intersected here and there by ridges and groves, and in many places partook of the character of both plain and mountain. In a bunch of trees at the base of a long slope he found a spring of pure and delicious water. It bubbled from beneath a rock, and ran away in a tiny rivulet which was lost in the sands below.

Here he made his noonday balt, and indulged in a brief nap. When he awoke he was surprised to see several cows sucking the water from the rivulet a few yards below. A herd of cattle was grazing further down.

"The very ones!" he exclaimed, half rising and slapping his knee.

The brands of the cows were plainly visible. "The Bitter Creek brand, as I'm a sinner!" was the comment. "The stolen cattle are in this valley, sure. How the thieves got them here, I don't know, but here they are; or at least a part of them. That whole herd wouldn't account for half that are missing."

He got up and sauntered toward the animals for a closer examination. After assuring himself that they were certainly Staples's cows, he

visited the herd: Most of these were also cows, many of them with calves at their sides.

The Bitter Creek brand was noticeably prominent, but several other ranches were represented. The steers and young cattle bore a brand that was wholly unfamiliar to him.

"The scamps are smart!" he ejaculated, as he noted this. "Those are the increase of the herd. They wouldn't dare to offer the other cattle in any market, but with that brand on them they might run them off somewhere and sell them. That explains why cows only are stolen. The rascals don't try to sell the cows; but as soon as the calves are old enough they slap that brand on 'em and turn them into cash. It's about as slick a trick as I ever stumbled onto."

He circled the herd and closely examined almost every animal, and found an abundance of proof confirmatory of his theory.

"Now, if I can only run across the thieves, I'll count this an extra good day's work! There's not much chance of that, though. It may be they don't stay in this valley at all; but just come here when they want to round-up and cut out for market. Still, the cattle are rather tame for that. They'd be wilder if they only saw a man once or twice a year."

"I wonder if the old medicine-man knows anything about this? It's hard to say. He's a sly dog, and I wouldn't put it past him. Anyhow, I'll have to thank him for showing me the way in here, and then cooping me up so that I had to make a search."

He went back to the spring, filled his canteen and put the venison in shape for carrying, and pushed on into the valley in an aimless manner.

During the afternoon he saw other bunches of cattle, branded in the same way, but he saw no sign of human presence. Several times he ascended considerable elevations and closely scanned the surrounding country. From appearances he might go on forever without finding any outlet from the place.

He had followed no general direction, but had gone here and there as fancy dictated, and when night came he calculated he was about a dozen miles due west of the rock gateway.

"I ain't doing any good at this," he muttered, as he sought out a place to sleep. "I believe I'll take the back track in the morning. I know where the cattle are now. If I can just get out of here, I'll bring a band of cowboys, and we'll rout the fellows out, if it takes a month."

This idea was firmly fixed in his mind by morning.

"Yes, I'll go back to the chasm! It's not so mountainous on this side, and it'll be easier to make a search along it. It's bound to end somewhere. If I go on in this direction, it'll take me a month to get back to the Bitter Creek Ranch, if I do get out."

After breakfasting he ascended a high ridge and made another careful survey of the country. Nothing was revealed by it, and when he descended he set out on his return trip.

He walked briskly, and by ten o'clock had covered the greater part of the distance to the geyser.

Suddenly, in coming around the rocky spur of a ridge, he heard a succession of shots and a chorus of cries. The sounds came from some point beyond an extensive grove, a half-mile away.

"Hullo! what can be the row?" Dane questioned, drawing his revolver and hurrying in that direction. "Sounds like the cattle-thieves may be having a high old fight among themselves. I hope it ain't no worse. If it's just dog eat dog, the world will be the better off when the job's finished."

He ran at his best gait, hastened by the occasional shot that now and then broke the quiet, and soon reached the grove.

As he emerged on the opposite side a strange sight met his gaze.

In a rocky hollow, two or three hundred yards away, were two men and a pack-mule. A huge bunch of what seemed to be canvas lay on the ground between two trees. The trees were low and about twenty or thirty feet apart.

As Dane looked, each of the men seized an end of rope fastened to the canvas and scrambled with it up a tree. Then, in a few moments, they leaped down, leaving the ropes hooked in some way to the trees. One of the ends appeared to pass through a small pulley and hung to the ground. To it the mule was quickly hitched, and as he walked away the rope between the trees tightened and a huge bunch of canvas was drawn into the air.

"It's a balloon!" he exclaimed, rubbing his eyes. "How it got here, and who those fellows are, though, stumps me."

Then another shot rung out, and he saw a third man defending a narrow pass that led to the hollow from the north!

CHAPTER XV. 'UP IN A BALLOON.'

THE big balloon was now suspended between the two trees, its wrinkled folds swaying slightly in the freshening breeze, and its lower end touching the ground. The men, who were rushing about like mad, soon produced a number of stakes and an iron-headed mallet. The stakes were driven in a circle around the mouth of the balloon, slanting outward; and to them the balloon was anchored with stout cables.

"They surely can't be cattle-thieves," thought Dane, as he watched them closely. "More likely the cattle-thieves have been chasing them. If so, I ought to bear a hand."

He started forth impulsively and hurried toward the men.

They saw him as he left the timber; and, stopping their work, stared at him with evident suspicion. The cowboy elevated his hands, to show his friendly intentions, and hastened up to them at a lively run.

"Excuse me," he panted. "I saw you from over there and thought, from the looks of things, that you were in trouble."

They glanced at each other inquiringly and sharply eyed him before replying:

"So you don't belong to that crowd of villains back yonder? They chased us a mile or more, and shot all our pack-mules but this one. If we had a few of Uncle Sam's troopers we'd quickly teach 'em a lesson."

The speaker scowled as he looked toward the pass.

"We haven't time for explanations," he continued. "We're going to try to get out of here in this balloon. It's only a hot-air concern, but maybe it'll answer our purpose. If you'd like to help us, run up there and assist Jim in holding the rascals in check."

"But, stay! Do you know any way out of this hole? If you do, we'll let the balloon business slide."

"There ain't any way out in this direction; and to tell the truth, I don't know of any way out at all. There's a big chasm over there that cuts us off from the mountains."

"Then help Jim, while we get a fire to going under this thing. We'll be in bad shape if those fellows break through the pass."

Dane drew his revolver and started off at full run; while the two men began to collect fuel and arrange it beneath the mouth of the balloon.

"Now, if this fellow, Jim, should take it into his head that I'm one of the other chaps and have flanked him, he'll be mighty apt to pull on me," thought the cowboy, as he neared the pass.

But the man had seen Dane while the latter was talking to his comrades near the balloon.

"Your pard sent me," Dane explained, as he dropped down at the man's side. "Having a hot time, eh?"

The man's reply was interrupted by a shower of balls that just then came hurtling through the pass. The defenders returned the fire, working their revolvers as rapidly as possible.

"Cattle-thieves!" said Jim, peering above the bowlders in the direction of the enemy. "That's what we took 'em to be. There's a dozen of them, or more. They jumped onto us about a mile back; and we had a lively run for it, I tell you. None of us were hurt, but they laid out our ponies and pack-mules. We got only one of the pack-mules through; but as luck would have it, it was the one that carried the balloon."

The balls were again singing through the pass; and he stopped to return the fire. When he once more dropped behind the bowlder there was a questioning look on his face. Dane interpreted it as personal to himself; and hastily accounted for his presence there.

"We're Government surveyors," said the man, peering above the rock as the Cowboy Detective finished his recital. "We were sent out from Washington to make an exploration of this country. And it's a wonderful country, I tell you. Some remarkable stories have been received about it, but the half wasn't told or dreamed of. It's just filled with strange scenery. There isn't its equal on the continent."

"How did you get into it?" queried the cowboy, rattling out a volley of shots.

"We came in from the north and east, through the Blackfoot country. There are plenty of ways of getting in, and only the fear of Indians has kept the world from knowing all about this section long ago. We've been travel-

ing around a month or more, and have managed to see a good deal of it in that time. Two of our mules were loaded down with specimens; but I suppose we'll lose them and all the records we've kept."

"We came prepared for almost any kind of work. That's why we brought the balloon. We've only used it once or twice, but it's a substantial affair for a hot-air balloon. You see, we didn't know but there might be inaccessible places we'd want to look into, and by using it as a captive balloon we could view them from above."

"When those scoundrels downed our animals we made a break for this pass, thinking we might be able to hold them here until the balloon could be got ready. It surprises me why they don't charge. They keep slinging the lead, though, but not a one of them has ventured to show himself."

"Do you know, I've been thinking of that!" said Dane, glancing uneasily toward the inflating balloon. "It's my opinion they're working a flank movement, and will catch us in the rear, pretty soon. The firing isn't as lively as it was when I first got here. Likely there's only one or two of them doing the shooting, while the others are crawling around the ridge."

"No doubt you are right!" and the surveyor looked grave. "But, if they'll hold off another five minutes, we can snap our fingers at them."

A brisk breeze had set in from the west, and the balloon was swaying and hobbing at a great rate, in spite of the steady rope and the stout cables. A hot fire was flaming under the gaping mouth, filling the envelope with superheated air; and this fire the two men were industriously feeding with sticks of dry wood. Near them lay the basket or car, ready to be hauled into place when the balloon was in condition for ascension.

The balloon was rapidly expanding; and as they looked at it a shrill whistle cut the air. The surveyor started and smiled.

"They are about ready. That's the signal for us to come in. Of course you'll want to go along; and the basket's big enough to hold an extra man. Now, we'll give 'em a whirl, and then run for it."

They fired a few shots in quick succession, joined in a defiant yell, and started for the tugging balloon as fast as their legs could carry them.

Almost at the same moment the flanking party of cattle-thieves burst around a spur of the ridge half a mile away. They were mounted, and lashed their ponies furiously as soon as they had left their place of concealment.

"Let 'em come!" panted the surveyor, as he raced at the cowboy's side. "If we can beat 'em by two minutes, and keep out of gun-shot, we'll be safe enough. The top hamper of the balloon's already been cut loose, and there won't be much delay in starting."

The men had kicked the fire away and were dragging the basket into position, as they came up.

"Bear a hand, there!" shouted the one who seemed to be the leader. "Cut two of those cables on the other side, will you? Lively, or they may fill the bag full of holes with their rifle-balls! Ease off those others. Steady, so; there. Hold her at that!"

Dane's companion sprang to obey, and manipulated the ropes in accordance with the directions of his chief. The others were equally active, and soon the gigantic envelope was straining at three lengthened cables, and threatening at every surge to tear the firmly driven stakes from the earth.

"Into it!" came the command, and the chief pointed to the basket that was being raked about on the ground. "Stir yourselves; they'll be reaching for us in another minute."

Dane clambered into the basket. The surveyors crowded in with him. Then the cables cables were severed and the balloon shot into the air. The basket was lifted from the ground with a terrible jerk and narrowly missed striking among the branches of one of the trees.

"Now yell, you devils, if it'll do you any good!" cried the chief, shaking his fist angrily at the still distant horsemen. "Yell till you split your throats; you can't hurt us now."

The balloon had mounted rapidly and was already several hundred feet above the earth. It still shot upward with amazing velocity. To Dane, however, it seemed that the earth was receding and the landscape rushing with marvelous speed toward the west.

"The old mule takes it easy," laughed one of the men. "He has gone to grazing just as if the murderers of his brethren weren't coming down the slope like a lot of howling Apaches."

"There are the other fellows," asserted the chief, pointing to the opposite side of the ridge, which now appeared to lie almost beneath them.

They were the ones that had been left to keep up a fusillade at the pass. There were three of them; and though they looked like small children, they were distinctly visible.

"I imagine I can see their open mouths," declared Dane, smiling at the fancy. "They certainly see us; and those other fellows must feel so badly sold that they'll want to go off somewhere and hide."

CHAPTER XVI.

OVER THE MOUNTAIN WALL.

AS the balloon continued to ascend, a grand panorama was spread out beneath them. Purple mountains were piled on almost every hand; and the wonderland of the Yellowstone, with its streams and valleys, its timber and hills, stretched away beyond the reach of their vision.

They were now above the mountain wall that had thus far barred the valley from the ranchmen of the eastern plains. The impassable chasm seemed merely a black line extending for many miles along the mountain slope. The clustering tepees of the Crow village seemed a huddled group of gigantic ant-hills.

The leader of the party drew from a leathern case a strong field-glass and leveled it at the tepees.

"Take a look," he said, handing the glass to the Cowboy Detective.

The cowboy was glad of the opportunity, and soon had the Crow village within the field of vision.

"They see us!" he cried, excitedly. "They are staring at us and running about in a ridiculous way. Probably they think they have discovered some new species of bird."

Then he focused the glass on the hazy hills which held the cabin of Hank Conner. He could make out the cabin, but could see no one moving about it. Then, after viewing the ranch country, he passed the glass to one of the surveyors, who was eager for a look.

"I'm afraid we'll have trouble in landing," said the chief, speaking in grave tones. "These hot-air balloons don't stay up very long, and we will begin to descend in a few minutes. The air in the envelope must be cooling rapidly. And when we do go down, we'll be apt to go down lively!"

Another look at the landscape convinced Dane that the balloon was already beginning to settle slowly toward the earth.

"We'll be likely to get some bones broke, if we strike among the rocks!" he asserted. "How high are we?"

"Perhaps half a mile. It's hard to tell without an instrument. That wall is a comparatively low one, yet we didn't have much room to spare when we cleared its crest. We're settling now; but if the breeze holds out, we may make the edge of the plain."

Five minutes later there could be no doubt they were settling toward the earth at a rapid rate.

The basket contained, among other things, a grapnel and stout line; and these were now arranged and allowed to trail from the car.

"If that catches on anything it'll fetch us up like a roped steer!" Dane remarked in a dubious way. "I don't think I'd care about ballooning, as a regular business."

"It's like a bad habit," was the reply. "It's generally a good deal easier to start it than it is to stop. But we'll not worry, yet. We got away from those scamps nicely; and we may make a landing just as easily."

The wind was now becoming broken by the mountain barrier, and came in gusts and fitful puffs. But the breeze, such as it was, still swept them in an easterly direction; and the chances of making a safe descent increased. But it was soon evident they would not reach the open country.

As the air in the envelope cooled the balloon fell very rapidly. They had passed over the wildest and rockiest portion of the range and were approaching the timber-filled gorges and broken lands.

"Hold hard!" cried the leader, as the swaying grapnel barely missed entanglement in the branches of a tall tree. "If we strike here it will go rough with us."

He began hauling in on the grapnel line to prevent the threatened disaster. When the trees were cleared, he paid it out again; and all awaited, with strained muscles and tense nerves, the impending shock.

But it was not as severe as expected. The grove served to further still the wind; and when the grapnel struck and caught among the bowl-

ders, the balloon careened like a gigantic kite, and then settled to the earth. The passengers were bumped and bruised considerably but no serious hurts were received.

"Almost better than could be expected!" exclaimed the chief, as he scrambled to his feet, having leaped from the basket before it touched the rocks. "I thought once she was going to come down like a meteor."

The others, who were tangled up in the ropes and half-smothered in the flattened envelope, now crawled out, one by one, pleased to find the breath still in their bodies.

"I'd rather ride a bucking broncho, any day, than that thing!" growled Dane. "If a broncho pitches you, you haven't got so far to fall."

"And if you'd been riding one, the cattle-thieves would have gobbled you. Come! I haven't learned how you got in there, yet, nor what you were doing there."

The leader reclined against a bowlder as if too worn to think of any further movement.

"There wasn't any time left for story telling," and Dane smiled. "I explained matters to Jim, there, while we were lying at the pass."

Then he recounted his adventures at length, for the benefit of the entire party.

"Well, you know us!" said the leader, who had given his name as Stuart Carlton. "As a matter of course we're mighty anxious to get the things we were forced to leave back there. There's a lot of valuable apparatus and specimens among the packs, as well as our journals and camping outfit. Our expedition will practically be a failure if we lose them."

"I've been thinking you'd want them," was Dane's mingling rejoinder. "You had no idea those fellows were there, I suppose, until they attacked you?"

"Never dreamed of such a thing. We'd seen a lot of cattle, though; and as we'd heard of no ranches, we naturally came to the conclusion that they were driven in there by cattle-thieves. When the fellows came for us like a lot of bald hornets, and without cause, we knew we were right. They would not have jumped onto us in that way if they'd been honest men."

"I was going to propose that we combine against them," the cowboy averred. "The great trouble is, we don't know where they're located, and it may take a long hunt to find them. But now that I know they're in there I'll never stop till I drive them out and get back the cattle. You may not care for so long or big a job."

"That will depend, of course. We want to move eastward as soon as we can. But we're willing to spend a reasonable amount of time in assisting you."

"We can get plenty of ponies and cowboys at the Bitter Creek Ranch, but we can't take the ponies into the valley. If your balloon would carry ponies, now!"

"'Twould be a great thing!" laughing at the idea. "If we could just drop a company of mounted cowboys in among those fellows, how they would run!"

"But we can take the cowboys, if not the ponies. Not in the balloon, but in the way I went. Then, if nothing better suggests, we can organize a systematic search of the valley."

It was now considerably past noon, for they had been talking a long time, and they were beginning to feel hungry. But they had left all their provisions in the valley; and, since leaving it, they had seen nothing in the way of game.

"It's a long ways to this ranch, you say, and I never like to walk on an empty stomach!" demurred Stanley, the third member of the exploring party.

"No; I shouldn't think any kind of stomach would make good pavement," laughed Jim Grimes, the pass defender.

"Do you think we can find this place again?" questioned the chief, moving toward the collapsed balloon. "We'll have to roll this up and stow it away somewhere, and come back after it when we have demolished the light-fingered gentlemen we have been talking about."

The envelope was folded and rolled in accordance with his instructions, and thrust, with the basket and other belongings, into an opening between the rocks. Stones were placed so as to conceal the opening; and the party, with Dane in the lead, set out on the long journey to the Bitter Creek Ranch.

The way was very rough, and the most of the afternoon was consumed in getting out of the hills. They made good progress when they reached the plain, but night came down while they were yet a considerable distance from their destination.

The fatigues of the day and their hunger were telling on them so severely that they began to

think they would be compelled to camp on the plain and wait for morning, when a light from the ranch house gleamed across the level expanse like a star and cheered them to renewed efforts.

It was late when the Cowboy Detective's vigorous raps aroused Bill Staples from his slumbers.

"Hey!" he yelled, in answer to the summons. Then, as he recognized Dane's voice:

"Yes, yes, I'm comin'. Been lookin' fer ye ever' hour. Was jes' beginnin' to think you'd been gobbled."

He swung the door open and appeared, lamp in hand.

Mutual introductions and hand-shakings followed; and after that, abundance of cold eatables was placed before the hungry men.

While Dane was yet eating, the ranchman caught his eye and beckoned to him.

"She fetched it over," he said, with a grin, producing and delivering Nellie's letter when he had drawn Dane aside. "She was back ag'in, to-day, inquirin' about ye, and looked worried to death when I tol' her you hadn't got in."

CHAPTER XVII.

ON TO CROSS-NOTCH.

"THIS Cross-Notch must be somewhere in the valley," mused Dane, as he read and re-read the letter. "Though why Conner should select that as a residence puzzles me. Well, we'll be moving in that direction bright and early to-morrow, and I'll try to see Nellie before we come back."

Bill Staples was much interested in the story told by Dane and the surveyors.

"Ye can have every cowboy on the ranch, an' myself throwed in," he agreed. "The skunks have nigh about ruined the cattle bizness fer the last two or three year. I've been thinkin' a feller's a fool fer tryin' to run a ranch this fur up-country. What with the stealin' and raids of Injuns an' thieves, an' the long distance to market, it's a pesky and worritin' bizness all 'round. If we clear the thieves out o' that valley, maybe a feller can sleep, nights."

Before daybreak Dane had selected his men—a dozen fearless and cool-headed cowboys—and with Staples and the surveyors set out for the gorge leading to the ledge. They were mounted on Staples's best cow-ponies, and reached the head of the gorge about sunrise.

"We'd better turn the ponies loose here," explained Dane, running his eye along the narrow ledge above. "My little experience shows me it's useless to try to take ponies over that. We might get them along, after a fashion, but we'll make better time on foot."

Accordingly the saddles and bridles were removed from the ponies and concealed among the bushes. As for the animals, it was believed they would return to the ranch of their own accord.

"There will be a mighty gathering of saddles and bridles," the cowboy remarked, as he directed the concealment of the articles. "That is, if we get back in condition to want such things. I've got a saddle and bridle of my own up by the alkali sink that I'd hate to lose."

Several axes and a number of tent sledges had been brought from the ranch, and when the journey was recommenced these were taken along. Their intended use was made plain when the party reached the soapy bend.

"Featherstone got around this point without much trouble; but he could climb like a mountain sheep. We'll have to clear a way here if we expect to cross."

Dane had planned how this was to be done, so no time was lost in commencing the work. As many men as could work abreast were ordered to advance as far along the ledge as possible. These attacked the soapy surface with the sledges and ax-heads, beating and scraping it away until the rough rock below was revealed. They worked rapidly for a few minutes, then crawled back and their places were taken by others. These were in turn relieved, and the task pushed with the greatest energy.

Hours went by, however, before the soapy surface was sufficiently cleared away to permit their passage.

"A devil's work, that was," growled sturdy Bill Staples. "I've heerd o' lots o' pizen meanness, but that jes' lays it over all. The feller that done it ought to be chucked into the sink hisself."

The cowboys were equally indignant, and had the perpetrator of the deed fallen into their hands just then, he would have been shown little mercy.

It was high noon when they reached the point where the ledge dipped into the canyon; and here they halted to rest and eat their dinner.

"I half look for a fight at the chasm," the cowboy detective stated to Staples, when they were ready to resume the advance. "We can cross only by way of the rocking stone; and they could scarcely find a better place to make a stand. Concealed among the bushes and rocks beyond, three or four men could almost hold an army at bay. I'm hoping they'll not suspect our coming."

"Don't see why they should," the ranchman averred. "They hain't reely had any cause to think you've been in the valley."

"No; but they may think the surveyors were looking for them. Anyway, the fact that the latter were joined by a fourth man will be likely to make them suspicious. But they may rest secure in the thought that we can't easily get at them."

Progress up the canyon was comparatively free from difficulty, and they soon reached the sandy plateau in front of the rock gateway. There were no evidences that the Crows had been there since the memorable morning when Dane had witnessed the medicine-dance.

On arriving at the chasm Dane was much relieved to find that the cattle-thieves had posted no force there.

"They can't know we're coming," was his comment. "And that gives us a big advantage. Now, if we only knew where they are, so we could move on 'em at once!"

"Shouldn't be s'prised if we find they've skipped!" Staples declared. "There's one satisfaction, though, they hain't had time to git away with the cattle."

Dane clambered up the rocking stone, half fearful even yet that he might be fired on from the opposite side; and when he was safely across Staples followed him.

Two cowboys were ordered to remain there to tip down the stone when the party should return. Then the others followed Dane and the ranchman; and the march into the valley commenced.

When the edge of the grove was gained they were startled by a wild yell. The yell was followed by the noise of a struggle and a woman's scream. The sounds seemed to come from a point near the geyser.

"Some devilment afoot!" cried Dane, drawing his revolver and hurrying forward at a quick run, movements which were imitated by every member of the party.

The scream had brought startling suggestions. Cross-Notch must lie somewhere in that valley; and, although Nellie's letter had stated she would not go to that point until Sunday, there was a possibility that Conner had changed his plans.

The Cowboy Detective reached the further side of the grove to behold the Indian trader lift the Mad Hermit as if to hurl him into the geyser. He did not see Nellie, for she was screened from his sight by intervening bushes.

There was scarcely time for thought. On the impulse of the moment Gid gave a great shout, raised his revolver and fired.

At this Conner dropped the hermit heavily to the earth and precipitately fled.

"There's other fellers after me!" he asserted, as he gained Nellie's side. "We've got to dig out of this."

The rascal had caught a glimpse of the party and knew who they were; but he had reasons for not revealing the fact to Nellie. He grasped her hand and half dragged her with him as he rushed on.

The fright and consequent nervousness, combined with fatigues already undergone, had exhausted her strength; and when he saw she could go no further, he lifted her in his strong arms and carried her as he might have done a child.

"There's some ponies over hyer," he puffed, setting her on her feet when they had gained a sheltered locality. "I put 'em hyer day 'fore yesterday thinkin' they'd help us after our walk, an' now they'll come mighty handy. Set down there an' rest, while I go after 'em."

She was only too glad to comply; and in a little while he came back with two ponies, which were bridled but not saddled. But, Nellie was an expert horsewoman, and could ride almost as well without a saddle as with one. Urged on by her fears, she asked no questions, and they were soon flying from the spot.

When Dane reached the geyser he paid no heed to the unconscious hermit, but hastened in pursuit of Conner. The latter baffled him, however, by a change of course; and while looking for the trail the Mad Hermit dashed by like an unleashed bloodhound.

Featherstone's eyes were glued to the ground, his hair floated wildly in the wind, and his lips

were drawn apart by a fierce frenzy. After him streamed Staples, the surveyors and the cowboys.

Dane joined the pursuit, scarcely knowing what it would lead to. He wondered why Conner should run away in that manner, and if the screaming woman was really Nellie. His mind was crowded with conjectures that only served to confuse and distress him.

Featherstone quickly distanced the foremost; and Dane, seeing they could not keep pace with him, ran to the top of a ridge to gain some idea of the course to be followed. From this point he saw the mounted fugitives. They were bearing in toward the hills; and as his gaze roved in advance of them he thought he detected a thin column of smoke rising against the rocky background.

As he turned to descend the ridge he caught sight of the hermit, who had struck the trail of the ponies and was following them swiftly and unerringly.

"There'll be bloody work if that hermit comes up with them," he declared, when he rejoined the party. "I'd like to know where Conner got those ponies."

This was made plain a few minutes after, when a band of ponies, with saddle-marks on their backs, were discovered feeding peacefully in a little hollow. They seemed tired and hungry, and acted as if they had been ridden recently.

At Dane's suggestion they were surrounded and a sufficient number caught to mount the entire party. Neither saddles nor bridles were to be found, but the cowboys supplied the deficiency in part by cutting their *riatas* into suitable lengths and knotting them into halters.

"Now to discover what all this quareness means!" cried Bill Staples, digging his spurs into the pony's flanks and leading the way after the Mad Hermit.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CORRALED!

"WELL, if the hermit hasn't straddled the old pack-mule!"

The exclamation burst from Dane's lips as the party reached the open country.

Hank and Nellie Conner were not visible, but the hermit, mounted on the surveyors' pack-mule, was speeding along as if he had them in full sight.

Their faster ponies overhauled and passed the mule. Then Dane placed himself at the head of the cowboys and led the way along the dimly defined trail. A glance backward, however, showed that Featherstone managed to keep very closely in their wake.

A half-hour of this hot and rapid work brought them to the top of a long and timber-fringed rise.

"Corraled, by the great horned steers of Texas!" cried Bill Staples, as he looked down the opposite slope. "We've got the hull b'ilin' of 'em Hank Conner, cattle-thieves, an' all! Hank's shorely one of 'em, er he wouldn't be a-puttin' fer their shanties like a loaded bee makin' fer home."

The shrewd ranchman, who had never held a good opinion of Conner, was correct in his surmise. A strange fate seemed driving the pretended fur-trader to his doom. It might never have been shown that he was the chief of the Cross-Notch cattle-thieves had it not been for his fears of the hermit and his attempt to carry out an unscrupulous plot against Nellie.

There were two cabins in a bushy hollow, at a point where a gorge from the hills intersected a ravine. Conner and Nellie were nearing these cabins. The pursuers could see that he was swinging his hat in a frantic way. Doubtless he was also shouting words of warning, for a number of men were swarming out of the houses and bustling about as if preparing for a defense.

The excited cowboys gave them little time for preparation. With a chorus of yells they thundered down the slope. The thieves disappeared as they approached.

"We don't want a fight if we can get out of it," said Dane, thinking of Nellie. "The girl might be killed. I'll ride out and see if we can't have a conference."

He tore a small branch from a tree, affixed his handkerchief to it, and advanced, waving it above his head.

Evidently the thieves did not care to temporize, for when he came within rifle-range, he was greeted with a shower of balls.

"Come back!" bawled Staples. "They'll jes' nacherly riddle ye. They're sp'ilin' fer a fight, an' you bet we're jes' the boys to 'comerate em."

"But the girl!" protested Dane, riding back when he saw he could accomplish nothing.

"Hank Conner'll look out fer her!"

Further objections were useless; and, as the cowboys were eager for the fray, an advance was ordered. At Staples's suggestion the force was divided, one party being led by the ranchman and the other by Dane.

They were to approach the cabins from different directions; and, as they separated to execute the maneuver, Featherstone dashed up on the pack-mule and joined Staples's party.

The position of the Cross-Notch cabins was favorable for defense, but it also rendered them easy of approach; and, shielded by the scrub, the assailants were quite near before the defenders could use their weapons to any advantage.

Here the assaulting forces dismounted, tied their ponies to bushes, and made a mad rush for the doors. Several fell before the doors were reached and broken in. Then the outlaws, realizing that the day was lost, tried to escape by the windows. Blackfoot Joe was among them; and he, with Hank Conner, dragged Nellie through one of the windows, and hurried with her toward the concealment of the brush.

The men were fired on as they ran, and Dane and Featherstone rushed in pursuit.

As he reached the line of bushes Conner fell. Nellie, who had no knowledge of why they were attacked, or who the pursuers were, knelt screaming at his side. The half-breed rudely grasped her, his eyes flaming with an evil light, and dragged her on. She attempted a resistance. Then he wrenched at her so roughly that her clothing was torn from her right arm and shoulder, and she fell fainting.

Featherstone saw the action, and when his gaze fell on the exposed arm and shoulder he stopped as if stupefied, cried aloud and sunk down at her side.

Dane was sorely puzzled at this, and after firing a couple of shots at the vanishing half-breed, turned back to Nellie. He was amazed to see on the upper part of her arm, a livid scar disfiguring the white skin. It looked like an imperfectly branded F.

She came out of her swoon at the same moment, and seeing Dane, called his name. As she struggled to her feet she noticed the torn condition of her dress, and blushing redly, replaced the sleeve and secured it with pins. Then she remembered that Conner had been shot, and turned from Dane to kneel at his side.

Conner was conscious, but there was a look of death in his eyes.

"Carry me into the cabin," he whispered. "I've got something I want to say."

The fight was over. Several of the cattle-thieves had been slain, some had escaped, but the larger number had been taken, and were bound and helpless prisoners. These were held in one of the cabins, and into the other Conner was borne.

It was a strange story he had to tell—the confession of a life given over to evil—and as his hearers hung on his feeble words they almost forgot the strange circumstances surrounding them. His sentences were disconnected, his ideas sometimes chaotic, for he was near death. Thrown into a few words his statements were as follows:

Years ago he had been a squaw man among the Blackfeet, and became almost as much uncivilized and brutal as the Blackfeet themselves. The half-breed, Blackfoot Joe, was his son, born to him at that time.

He accompanied the Blackfeet on many of their forays against the whites. On one of these expeditions they devastated the home of Joel Featherstone, a ranchman of the northern plains. Featherstone's wife and son were killed and he himself left for dead. Through the whim of a chief, Featherstone's daughter, at that time only about three years of age, was carried away.

Conner adopted the daughter, and in time formed a genuine fatherly attachment for her. A year later he tired of his Blackfoot wife and her savage people and left them, taking the child with him. He moved further south and became a fur-trader, trafficking principally with the Crows; but he kept up a desultory communication with the Blackfeet.

Featherstone, whose mind had been unbalanced by his misfortune, became a Nemesis on his trail, and forced him to frequent changes of abode.

Conner, in his wanderings, discovered the mysterious valley and explored a portion of it. Then he drew around him a few wild spirits—among them Blackfoot Joe—now a young man—and began to prey upon the herds of the Yellowstone ranchmen. The valley guarded their

secret, and by driving the increase of the herds into the Mormon country the nefarious business was made extremely profitable.

Their secret was threatened, however, when a small band of Crows moved into the vicinity. Conner was acquainted with these Crows, and by means of a rude knowledge of medicine had previously effected some cures among them. By deceptive practices he increased the reputation thus gained, and was made the chief of their medicine-men.

Having gained this position he made them believe that the valley was haunted by demons, and that the chasm was put there by the Great Spirit to keep the Crows from entering it and suffering death. An accident revealed to him the properties of the rocking stone; and he was thus able to further enhance his reputation for miraculous powers.

The cattle stolen were driven into the valley through a secret pass, a number of miles to the southward. This pass, and the ledge trail, were the only routes by which the valley could be gained from the direction of the ranch country. The thieves had on several occasions made narrow escapes by taking their ponies along the ledge. After such escapes the perilous bend over the alkali sink was covered with soap; and more than one adventurous cowboy had, by this means, been hurled to death.

As Conner concluded his story his eyes turned toward the door in a strange way. Featherstone had entered without attracting attention and had been a listener to all that was said. His manner was so changed that all were at once aware that his intellect was no longer clouded.

"Forgive me!" Conner whispered, huskily, as his face whitened in death.

"As God is my judge, I do! Oh, my daughter, my daughter!"

He opened his arms and Nellie rushed into them, sobbing.

It was revealed later that the livid scar on Nellie's arm had been caused by a hot branding-iron in the hands of her little brother. They had been playing, he as a cowboy and she as the herd, and in a spirit of juvenile thoughtlessness he had heated his father's branding-iron and thrust it against her arm.

There is little else to tell.

The surveyors recovered their records and property, and soon after returned to Washington where the reports of their discoveries created much comment.

Blackfoot Joe was never again seen in that section. Donald Knowlton, the ranchman, was implicated by the captured cattle-thieves; and, with them, served a long term as a convicted criminal.

Gideon Dane, with pretty Nellie as his wife, settled down as a Yellowstone ranchman, and Joel Featherstone, during the remaining years of his life, made their home his—a happy and contented man.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
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